

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

EXEGETICAL RESEARCH OF 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

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INTRODUCTION

No one likes waiting. Patience, persistence and perseverance are not popular words. They convey capricious craving, laborious longing and unrequited love. How intense is the longing when waiting for one of infinite worth? Christians live in the tension of what is called the “already but not yet” paradigm. This refers to the idea that Christ inaugurated the kingdom at the first advent but it will not be fully realized until the second at the *eschaton*. Gordon Fee writes, “The theological framework of the entire New Testament is eschatological.”¹ Thus, there is a tension inherent in the Christian worldview that eclipses all the yearnings of adolescence. It is the groaning of creation itself (Rom 8:22).

The purpose of this paper is to interpret 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 using sound exegetical methodology. This presentation will first give a survey of the historical and literary context, and then it will offer exegesis of the text. Difficulties arise because Paul assumes knowledge on the part of the original recipients that subsequent generations do not have. Allusions to the Old Testament will be discussed based on Paul’s background. Each issue will be handled sequentially. The paper will attempt to show that because we still live in the apocalyptic tension of the already/not yet, the eschatological content still has great value for the contemporary church. Paul taught the Thessalonian church that they would recognize the “day of the Lord” by two harbingers: the apostasy and the appearance of the man of lawlessness.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Founded in 315 BC by Alexander the Great’s general Cassander, the city of Thessalonica was named after Cassander’s wife, the half-sister of Alexander. An ideal

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 145.

location on the Thermaic Gulf in the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea made it a thriving seaport and commercial center.² The Ignatian Way passed through the city connecting it to Philippi to the east and westerly with Dyrrhachium on the Adriatic Sea. It served as capital of the Roman province of Macedonia after 146 BC. It is estimated that by the New Testament era the city may have had a population of up to two hundred thousand people.³ These facts are germane because the Thessalonians were not isolated and ignorant of the latest news. They did not believe the day of the Lord was upon them from a state of isolation.

According to Luke, Paul landed in Thessalonica with Silas and Timothy on his second missionary journey after being jailed and driven out of Philippi (Acts 17:1; 1 Thes 2:1–2). Although it is debated how long he was there, Luke reports that he preached in the synagogue for only three Sabbaths (Acts 17:2). Apparently, he had more Greek converts than Jews. Even so, the depth of the theology, especially eschatology, which Paul taught the new believers, leaves many to suspect he was there considerably longer than Acts implies (2 Thes 2:5). Paul practiced his tent making trade alongside them, not to be a burden to the burgeoning church (2 Thes 3:7). The Jews, envious of Paul's success, accused him of sedition against Caesar (Acts 17:7), ironically the same charge that got Jesus crucified. Paul and his fellow evangelists had to sneak away by night to Berea. He stayed there a short while and then briefly in Athens.

Later in Corinth, Timothy delivered a promising report about the Thessalonian church, which prompted the first letter (1 Thes 3:6). Because Archeologists have discovered an inscription which gives precise information about the proconsul Gallio, who Paul appeared

² John McRay, "Thessalonica," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1590-91.

³Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 377.

before in Corinth (Acts 18:12), his stay there can be dated to AD 50. It follows that the first Thessalonian letter was written within a year of that time and most scholars agree the second was written just a few months later.⁴ The literary context of both is eschatological.

LITERARY CONTEXT

The literary context of the New Testament is that the kingdom of God is here but not yet realized and believers eagerly anticipate its full actualization at the arrival of Christ. Paul is shepherding a flock acutely experiencing that tension. It is important to look back to Paul's first letter as well as this passage's place within the structure of the second. Fortunately, a portion of Paul's eschatological teaching can be gleaned from the first letter. Fatefully, that letter also addressed a serious misunderstanding concerning the Lord's return.

It seems that Paul taught them a good deal about eschatology. Nevertheless, because some believers had died since Paul had been there, some members of the fledgling church feared the deceased would miss out. Paul assured them that at the coming of Christ, the *parousia*, the dead would rise first and go to meet the Lord. Then the living believers would be caught up in clouds and both would remain with the Lord forever (1 Thes 4:13–18). This famous “rapture” passage is connected to the day of Lord a few lines later in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. Paradoxically, 1 Thessalonians 5 anticipates the very error that 2 Thessalonians addresses. Paul had told them, “But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief” (1 Thes 5:4). Even so, that is exactly what they thought had occurred a short while later albeit due to an intentional deception.

Paul is correcting a dangerous and cruel teaching that the realization of the kingdom is underway to the exclusion of the church he founded and dearly loves. Paul's thanksgiving in 2

⁴Lea, *The New Testament*, 380.

Thessalonians (1:3–12), similar to that in 1 Thessalonians, extols their characteristic loyalty in suffering and their example to others. The problem is that some believed that “the day of the Lord” had already occurred. Even worse, the lie was perpetrated under Paul’s name (2 Thes 2:2). The literary context of the main text (2:1-12) is that it is the substantive doctrinal basis for Paul’s correction.⁵ Having addressed that pressing concern, Paul returns to thanksgiving and encouragement for the Thessalonians (2 Thes 2:13–17). It seems that this is really the ultimate purpose of the letter. It is pastoral, to bolster and encourage a worried and discouraged congregation.⁶ In this case, the easement and encouragement comes by way of an eschatological corrective. He also addresses the refusal of some in the church to work (2 Thes 3:10–12) as they had “end time fever” and were not maintaining their responsibilities. The letter ends with benedictions and Paul’s authenticating personal greeting (2 Thes 3:16–18).

EXEGESIS: 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

The passage begins by defining its subject, “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him,” (2 Thes 2:1).⁷ This term “coming” is *parousia* in Greek. It generally means “to come” or “to appear.” In Hellenistic use, it referred to the visit of a ruler or even the *parousia* of the gods in a narrower sense. Its Hebrew analog is used of the Messiah in Genesis 49:10, Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 9:9. Paul uses it for Jesus return seven

⁵F. F. Bruce, vol. 45, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 162.

⁶ Jeffery A.D. Weima, “The Slaying of Satan's Superman and the Sure Salvation of the Saints,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 41 (2006): 73.

⁷ Unless otherwise notated ESV is used as the primary translation. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

times (1 Cor 1:8.; 15:23; 1 Thes 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thes 2:1; 2:8).⁸ The “gathering together unto him” is widely accepted to refer back to Paul’s teaching concerning the rapture of the church (1 Thes 4:17). The connection of the *parousia* to the rapture implies they are a single sequential event: the coming and then the gathering.

The next thought unit is “we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here” (2 Thes 2:1b–2). As discussed above this defines the occasion of the letter. Someone, perhaps at the instigation of some jealous Jews, had forged a letter “as though by us” meaning Paul, Silas, and Timothy. This had been convincing enough to cause a serious panic. It caused word to reach Paul in Corinth approximately 186 miles away. Despite previous instruction, they were convinced the day of the Lord had arrived.

Paul was well trained in the Hebrew Bible and the day of the Lord is a key theme found in the prophetic books. It purveys a theme of foreboding darkness and eschatological judgment. However, many of those days have passed (Am 5:18-20; Lam 2:1; Zep 1:7, 14). Nevertheless, other passages do refer to a time of ultimate judgment upon the nations and indicate a much wider scope (Ez 30:3; Jl 3:3, 14; Ob 15; Mal 4:5). Even more, Peter appropriated the term for the future return of Christ the final judgment of unbelievers (2 Pt 3:10). Paul also uses “the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6), “that day” (1 Thes 5:4; 2 Tm 1:12) as well as “day of wrath” (Rom 2:5).⁹ According to G.K. Beale, “for Paul the actual phrase *the day of the Lord* always refers to the consummation of the latter days (e.g., 1 Cor 1:8; 5:5;

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 865.

⁹ “Day of the Lord,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 397.

2 Cor 1:14).”¹⁰ It seems best to understand the term as period inaugurated at the Lord’s return rather than a single 24 hour day.

It seems reasonable to allow with Robert Thomas that Paul was arguing, “The day of the Lord had not yet arrived because these two conspicuous phenomena that will dominate the day’s opening phase had not yet happened.”¹¹ Even so, it seems rather fanciful to place the rapture of the church prior to the day of the Lord especially in light of its textual association with the *parousia*. Paul implies that believers will be witnesses to Jesus’ *parousia* on the day of the Lord (2 Thes 1:10). Even so, this is a major point of contention because Paul’s antidote is to argue that “day” cannot occur unless the apostasy and appearance of the man of lawlessness occur prior (2 Thes 2:3). It seems that Paul is arguing that these two events must occur before or at the very outset and since they have not, they should not panic.

David Dean argues that only the pretribulation position makes sense of the Thessalonians belief they were in the day of the Lord. In other words, he thinks they *necessarily* assumed they missed the pretribulation rapture. He states his case against the posttribulation rapture view as follows:

According to the posttribulation rapture view the false report said that the Day of the Lord had arrived, that the Day of the Lord follows the Second Coming, and that the rapture and the Second Coming are a single event. However, the Thessalonians would have immediately known that any claim that the Day of the Lord had arrived must be false, for several reasons.¹²

¹⁰G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament commentary series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 200), 201.

¹¹ Robert L. Thomas, *2 Thessalonians*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 11, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 320.

¹² David A. Dean. “Does 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 Exclude the Pretribulation Rapture?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (April-June 2011): 207.

He lists the following reasons: 1) Christ had not returned; 2) they assumed they were left behind; 3) Daniel's seventieth week had insufficient time; 4) the desecration of temple had not occurred; 5) the supernatural judgments of the tribulation had not ensued. He concludes, for these reasons, Paul had taught them pretribulationism. However, does this really follow?

He is correct that it is incoherent to believe both one and two. If the posttribulationist view were correct, they would not assume they missed the rapture. However, the use of the perfect-tense verb *enestekem*, rendered "has come" (2:2) likely means the forged letter claimed Christ's coming had already happened. To Dean, this is implausible but Beale points out the false teaching likely entailed the notion that there was no physical coming or resurrection of the dead rather a spiritualized one as with the Corinthian heresy (1 Cor 15:12–24). Thomas offers another option, "Perhaps a misunderstanding of grace led them to teach that Christians must earn their part in the *parousia* by persevering through severe suffering."¹³ It could have also been the same heresy taught in Ephesus, "that the resurrection has already happened" (2 Tm 2:18a).¹⁴ If the forged letter spiritualized the resurrection and *parousia*, which seems likely, then all of Dean's objections are easily explained. It was a known first century false teaching evidenced by the New Testament so Beale's position has strong support.

The third objection, that Daniel's seventieth week had insufficient time to transpire assumes the first century Christians interpreted Daniel's prophecy like modern dispensationalists. This seems circular. He makes a better argument from the lack of evidence

¹³Robert L. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 320.

¹⁴ Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 200.

for the desecration of the temple (Dn 9:27; Mt 24:15; 2 Thes 2:4). However, it follows that they did not know or forgot to look for that, hence Paul's corrective (2 Thes 2:3). While Paul seems familiar with Jesus eschatological teaching, one certainly cannot assume the Thessalonians were and most first century Jews likely considered Daniel's prophecy (11:31) fulfilled in Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Dean appears to be decontextualizing by projecting a fully realized New Testament eschatology onto the first century.¹⁵ Dean similarly argues that they would not have observed the supernatural judgments characteristic of the seventieth week, which again assumes too much.¹⁶ Nevertheless, if one grants these pretribulational arguments following them through to their logical conclusions, they are self-defeating.

If they believed the day of the Lord had arrived, with the rapture preceding or coincidental to it, *how could Paul have sent the letter*, since he would have departed in the rapture?¹⁷ This argument seems utterly devastating to pretribulationalism. However, like the recent Harold Camping fiasco, the false report could have set a date or something similar. Sticking to the text, they never would have accepted Paul wrote them after the rapture. Thus, the forged letter did not likely lead them to that conclusion. This weighs very heavily against the imminent pretribulation rapture view. The Thessalonians clearly believed they were experiencing the day of the Lord as objects of its wrath. This infers they were taught the rapture was not at the beginning of that period because they believed Paul wrote the report.

Paul's solution to their fear is that "day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction," (2 Thes 2:3). The rebellion is

¹⁵D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, U.K.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Paternoster; Baker Books, 1996), 129.

¹⁶ Since Revelation was likely composed in the 90s, we cannot assume they knew to expect this.

¹⁷ Dean, "Does 2 Thessalonians," 213.

also rendered “falling away” (KJV) from the Greek *apostasia* and seems to predict a mass rebellion within the church because one cannot fall way from or rebel against something as an outsider, it necessarily occurs from within. This implies an abandonment of biblical truth and classical Christian doctrine. Again, one encounters spurious arguments that *apostasia* means a “departure” in the sense of the church being gathered bodily and departing directly preceding the Great Tribulation and the coming of the antichrist. This idea has been soundly discredited by scholarship as the word almost certainly refers to a “religious apostasy.”¹⁸ Beale makes a solid case that, “The word *apostasia* in the Greek Old and New Testaments always refers to a “departure from faith.”¹⁹ In the book of Acts, it is also used this way: “and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses,” (Acts 21:21a). Because of Paul’s scholarship, it is also important to note its similar use in the LXX as well.²⁰ The case is conclusive that this is how Paul and his first century readers understood it. The second sign is much more enigmatic.

The second sign that Paul mentioned was that, “the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thes 2:3–4). This man of lawlessness or alternately “man of sin” (KJV) is widely considered to be the Antichrist or the “the Beast” in the book of Revelation (Rv 13, 17). There is debate

¹⁸ William W. Combs, “Is *Apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 3 (Fall 1998): 87.

¹⁹ Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 204.

²⁰ “Used in the political sense in 1 Esr. 2:23. It is usually used in the religious sense, Jos. 22:22; Jer. 2:19; 2 Ch. 29:19 (the apostasy of Ahaz); 33:19 (of Manasseh).” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 513.

on whether these two signs are separate or contingent events. Some scholars read it as an apostasy and revealing of antichrist, while others see the apostasy caused by the antichrist or vice versa. What is essential is what Paul had in mind and it clearly seems to reference the prophecy of Daniel. Specifically, the little horn (Dn 7:8; 8:9) and the willful king (11:36).

The parallels between Daniel's prophecy and Paul's teaching in vv.3–4 are obvious. Daniel wrote of a king who would “exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods” (Dn 11:36). While Daniel's predictions find some fulfillment in Antiochus IV many scholars, see a pivot point at verse 36 where Daniel shifts to the end time antichrist. For instance Stephen Miller contends, “Exegetical necessity requires that 11:36–45 be applied to someone other than Antiochus IV. The context indicates that the ruler now in view will live in the last days, immediately prior to the coming of the Lord.”²¹ Daniel also predicts, “at the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise” (Dn 8:23) which places him at the eschaton.²² This event also seems to be in focus in Daniel 12:11. However, Jesus makes the decisive call on this issue.

What essentially locks the futurist interpretation in for evangelicals is what Jesus predicted in Matthew 24, “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),” (Mt 24:15). This was of course long after an Antiochus IV and Jesus speaks of Daniel's prophecy as a still future

²¹ Stephen R. Miller, vol. 18, *Daniel*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 305.

²² H.A.A. Kennedy, *St. Paul's Conceptions of the Last Things*, (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1904), 49.

event. While it is demonstrable that Paul was informed of Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:15,²³ we can infer that that it had not occurred to the Thessalonians. How much of this Paul's Thessalonian readers would be aware of is a matter of speculation but it is clear that Paul meant for them to understand there would be end time figure with an apotheosis ambition preceding Christ's return.

Another important exegetical issue is what Paul intended by "temple of God." Amillennial supercessionists, like Beale and historicists like Calvin, argue forcefully for a non-literal meaning where Paul is metaphorically referring to the church. Beale argues, "The same phrase, *God's temple*, is found nine other times in the New Testament outside of 2 Thessalonians, and it almost always refers either to Christ or the church."²⁴ From the same line of reasoning, Calvin views it as the Pope.²⁵ While some of the Popes are arguably prophetic types of the final antichrist, John wrote in the first century that many antichrists had already come (1 Jn 2:18). Paul is necessarily referring to a final manifestation directly signaling the day of the Lord sitting in the only "temple of God" known to his readers, the one in Jerusalem.

While Beale can rightly argue from later Pauline theology that the Christian is a temple, he is wrongly imposing developed New Testament theology on to this primitive context. Paul is speaking instructively and pastorally. He is correcting an error. There is nothing in 1 or 2 Thessalonians which would lead Paul's readers to think what Beale prefers.

²³ Paul's use of "labor pains" in 1 Thes 5:3 cf. Mt. 24:8; "Thief in the night" 1 Thes 5:2 cf. Mt 24:43-44; The apostasy is seen in Mt. 24:9-11; Richard N. Longenecker, "The Nature of Paul's Early Eschatology," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 91.

²⁴ Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 207.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: 2 Thessalonians*, electronic ed. (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 2 Th 2:4.

If anything, the background from Daniel and Antiochus IV would be in their minds and they would most certainly envision the temple in Jerusalem. If theological presuppositions are laid aside, it seems clear that Paul meant for his readers to understand the then extant temple in Jerusalem and not the metaphorical church.

Paul then discusses some particulars about this man of lawlessness: 1) he is currently restrained (2:6-7); 2) he will be killed by Christ (2:8); 3) he is empowered to perform signs by Satan (2:9); and 4) his followers face fearsome judgment (2:10-12). The first item has generated a wealth of speculative scholarship about the identity of the restrainer. Suggestions include the Roman Empire, the Jewish state, Satan and the fallen angels, the angel Michael and holy angels, the preaching of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. Charles Powell detects a chiasmic structure emphasizing the ministry of the Spirit through the church.²⁶ Even so, the wide variety of opinion should suggest something to the exegete.

What one can detect by exegesis was that Paul speaks of it as a force (v.6, *to katechon*, neuter participle) and as a personal figure (v.7, *ho katechōn*, masculine participle).²⁷ In addition, Paul's readers knew what he was talking about from previous teaching (2:5-6). He says "And you know what is restraining him..." (2:6a). This infers that, whatever it is, it was active in the first century and is still today as per "until he is out of the way" (v. 7b). This seemingly rules out the Roman Empire and Jewish state as they died out and Christ did not return. Still, it is possible to think of this as "the rule of law" or government generally as

²⁶ Charles E. Powell, "The Identity of the Restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (July-September 1997), 329.

²⁷ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), 314.

Bruce advocates.²⁸ If so, the personal participle seems odd. Because of this, it seems that a personal supernatural power would be required to restrain a supernaturally endowed entity.

In agreement with Powell, the Holy Spirit or the church empowered by the Spirit are as good as candidates as any. Thomas and most premillennial dispensationalists agree.²⁹ Others, like Beale, argue it is the preaching of the Gospel or an angel who superintends its proclamation.³⁰ While most of these interpretations understand it as an entity or force opposed to antichrist, this is not necessarily the case. Verse 7 could be hinting at the nature of the restrainer by its association with the “mystery of lawlessness.” Green views it as satanic force.³¹ This has some plausibility as perhaps Satan is biding his time waiting for the appropriate moment to launch his plan. The fact that sincere Christian scholars come to a radically contradictory conclusion reveals this is far too inexplicable to be dogmatic. Other matters are clearer.

The man of lawlessness is whom, “the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming” (v. 8b). Since Jesus’ appearance marks his end, this supports posttribulationism. Kim Riddlebarger observes this is a quote from Isaiah, “with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked” (Is 11:4b).³² Daniel also predicts, “he shall be broken—but by no human hand” (8:25b). Perhaps Paul had Zechariah 14:12 and Ezekiel 39:4 in mind with this statement. Of course, there is a direct parallel by

²⁸ Bruce, *Word*, 172.

²⁹ Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” 324.

³⁰ Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 216.

³¹ Green, *The Letters*, 318.

³² Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth About the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2006), 143,

John written after Paul's letter (Rv 19:15-20). Paul's readers would be comforted to know that his reign of terror would be short lived. Yet confidence should not lead to complacency, the text speaks to the future revealing of this figure that will be empowered by Satan to perform deceptive miracles.

The *parousia* of the antichrist, "is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders" (2 Thes 2:9). The word rendered "activity" is from *energeian* in Greek and it is always used of supernatural activity in the New Testament (Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12; Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:4).³³ This has a parallel in Revelation 13:2 where the great red dragon empowers the beast. Paul and his readers were not influenced by the naturalistic philosophy of our day. Accordingly, he did not likely mean the signs and wonders will be mere parlor tricks or illusions rather genuine paranormal phenomena. The purpose of the supernatural acts is to deceive but the works themselves are real. It seems God allows this as a means to execute judgment on the unbelieving world.

The "strong delusion," from the Greek *energeian planes*, is highly controversial because it arguably implies that God intentionally deceives. However, Paul wanted his readers to understand that it is ultimately self-imposed because they refuse the truth. God is not deceiving innocents. In the Hebrew Bible, God punished people with "a spirit of confusion," (Is 19:14) and pronounced, "Blind yourselves and be blind" (Is 29:9). The Jews believed this was because the other nations chose to turn away from Yahweh and only Israel accepted his law.³⁴ God also sent a deceiving spirit to apostate King Ahab that his plans might fail (1 Kgs

³³ "In 2 Thess 2:9, 11 (→ also 2) use of the word underlines the demonic power of Satan and the *πλάνη* caused by him." Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: *Exegetisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 1:453.

22:22). Here a similar idea is expressed in that those, “who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (v. 12b) are given a “strong delusion” from God so that they believe what is false. It is also implied by the parable of the sower (Mk 4:15 ff.). The idea is also seen in Romans where Paul writes, “God gave them over...” (Ro 1:24, 26). From the flow of Paul’s argument here, it seems likely that Paul had the antichrist’s claim to deity in mind with “what is false.” The antichrist will appear irresistible to the unbelieving world and this is their due judgment.

APPLICATION

Despite two thousand years and the cultural and worldview differences, the situation of the modern church is remarkably similar. The contemporary church, like the early church, is inundated with deceptive teachings. This translates across the gap of time and culture intact. Just as Paul explains in 2:2 that they became too easily unsettled or alarmed, the church should not allow false teachers like Harold Camping to unsettle our lives. It was argued that the forged letter likely spiritualized the day of the Lord in such a way that the Thessalonians believed they were experiencing it even though there were no explicit signs other than their own persecution. In other words, it must have been an invisible second coming. In fact, this is also exactly what the Millerites (1844), Jehovah’s Witnesses (1914) and Harold Camping (2011) reverted to when their dates failed. Jesus was explicit that the whole world would see his arrival (Mt 24:30) and Paul reiterates this idea in this letter (2 Thes 1:7). While this application justifies its continued relevancy, the contemporary church should also anticipate the harbingers Paul mentioned.

³⁴Craig S. Keener and InterVarsity Press, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 2 Th 2:10.

Paul stated clearly that the “mystery of lawlessness was already at work” (2:6). This seems to infer that since that time, the spirit of antichrist has been working to deceive not only the worldly culture but also the church. Accordingly, Christians should anticipate a mass falling away from classical Christian doctrine and values. This is a calling to study apologetics. The Roman Catholics deviated from biblical Christianity centuries ago and remain unsound. That spirit of error is arguably amassed as Anglicans and evangelicals reunite with Rome. In the last few years, two more major mainline denominations, ELCA³⁵ and PCUSA,³⁶ not only accepted homosexual unions, they endorsed homosexual clergy. John MacArthur has argued this represents God’s judgment on our nation in line with Romans 1:18-32.³⁷ John Piper points out that these denominations are knowingly leading people to hell (1 Cor 6:9).³⁸ Then there is the attack of the “new” atheists like Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens. Does all of this represent impetus of the great apostasy? One should not rule out the possibility but Christianity is spreading like wildfire in China.³⁹ One should not be so myopic to focus only on the West. Another application is that Christians should not presume the pretribulation rapture simply because it is a pop culture meme. While it is not excluded as a

³⁵ ELCA News Service, “ELCA Assembly Opens Ministry to Partnered Gay and Lesbian Lutherans,” ELCA.org, <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx?a=4253> (accessed 12/08/2011).

³⁶ Eric Marrapodi, “First Openly Gay Pastor Ordained in the PCUSA Speaks,” CNN.com, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/10/first-openly-gay-pastor-ordained-in-the-pcusa-speaks/> (accessed 12/08/2011).

³⁷ John MacArthur, “When God Abandons a Nation,” Grace to You, <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/80-314> (accessed 12/08/2011).

³⁸ John Piper, “The Tornado, the Lutherans, and Homosexuality,” Desiring God, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/the-tornado-the-lutherans-and-homosexuality> (accessed 12/08/2011).

³⁹ Lauren Green, “Christianity in China,” Fox News, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/01/20/christianity-china/> (accessed 12/08/2011).

possibility, sincere scholars find it very tenuous. In truth, all rapture positions have problems.⁴⁰ Paul's message to the Thessalonians implies Christians will see the apostasy and rise of the final Antichrist. One should be vigilantly prepared for the long haul.

CONCLUSION

This paper offered an interpretation by exegetical analysis. In focusing on Paul's intention for his original readers, it was argued that this passage was the comforting corrective to a forged letter that upset his fledgling church. While there is debate on the content of the false report, the evidence points to a spiritualized view of the second coming and resurrection. Paul taught that the day of the Lord's dawning would be forecast by an apostasy and antichrist who claims to be God. This message is for the church today as well. The identity of the restrainer defies definite exegesis. In addition, it was argued that it is not wise to be dogmatic about the rapture timing. While this final antichrist will be killed at the coming of Christ, the spirit of antichrist is active today. The tendency to move further and further from biblical truth was demonstrated. Secularization has left the world scarcely prepared for what is coming. The unbelieving world will be given over to their unbelief and ultimately judged for their actions. Ultimately, the good news is the only antidote to the strong delusion (Rom 10:9).

⁴⁰ "Those who separate the Rapture from the Second Coming are hard-pressed to find this distinction expressed anywhere else in Paul's writings. But those who link the Rapture and the Second Coming must struggle to defend the view that Paul did not have in mind the assumption of Christians directly to heaven in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, but rather their return with Christ to the earth." Roy B. Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 294.

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