

2 Thessalonians 2:1-17
The Man of Sin
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, Tennessee

Today's passage about the Man of Sin is a difficult passage to interpret. This passage was not difficult for the Thessalonians to understand because Paul's written words are tied to what he had taught in Thessalonica.

2 Thessalonians 2:5

5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?

For us who did not get to sit in on Paul's teaching there at Thessalonica, his written statements are vague enough to be difficult to decipher with any certainty. Paul wrote about a falling way and the revealing of the man of sin. The Greek word translated "falling away" can refer either to a spiritual rebellion against truth or to a political rebellion against authority. The party falling away into rebellion could be either the Christian church or the Jewish nation. The revealing of the man of sin could refer to the rise of any person fitting Paul's description as long as it occurred some time after Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians and before the second coming of Christ. Candidates include first and second century Roman emperors, the corrupt papacy of the Middle Ages and a ruler coming to power shortly before the second coming. The statement about sitting "as God in the temple of God" refers to blasphemous behavior and attitudes,

but the mention of the “temple of God” could refer to the Jerusalem temple or to the Christian church or simply to a metaphorical claim to the worship and glory which is due to God alone.

I am going to present to you the interpretation that makes the most sense to me. This interpretation in its broad outline is that of the Presbyterian scholar B.B. Warfield. This is not the interpretation which is currently popular. The popular view today is that the man of sin is a person who will arise shortly before the second coming. Warfield thought instead that the man of sin was someone who arose not that long after Paul wrote his two letters to the Thessalonians. See Warfield’s article “The Prophecies of St. Paul” in either **Biblical and Theological Studies** or **Biblical Doctrines**.

Let's begin by looking at the situation in Thessalonica which Paul was addressing. Paul wrote that some false teachers had been falsely claiming that Paul was teaching that the day of Christ had already come or was already present. Our best indication of what Paul meant by “the day of Christ” is what Paul had already said a few verses previous where Paul talked in no uncertain terms about the second coming of Jesus:

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10

- 6 since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you,
- 7 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,

- 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,
- 10 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

These verses speak of Jesus' being revealed from heaven with His mighty angels to punish with everlasting destruction. This language is an unmistakable reference to the second coming at the end of this age. And here in chapter two, just a few verses later, Paul wrote about the coming of Christ and the gathering of saints, all language appropriate for the second coming. This would indicate that the day of Christ was a term for the events surrounding the second coming.

Now these false teachers were falsely claiming that Paul was teaching that the day of Christ was already present. They probably were not claiming that the actual second coming had already occurred because that would make no sense. It would be obvious enough that Jesus was not yet bodily and visibly upon earth and that the physically dead had not yet been physically raised. The term "day of Christ" as used here probably referred to a broader range of events than the second coming alone. The false teachers were probably claiming that this broader range of events had already begun, and that this meant that the second coming itself was just around the corner. Some were convinced that the second coming was so close at hand that they had begun

to neglect their daily obligations. They saw no reason to plan for the future or to prepare for tomorrow. With nothing to do, they had become busybodies as well as parasites.

2 Thessalonians 3:10-11

10 For even when we were with you, we commanded you this:
If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.

11 For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.

This fruitless mode of existence was consistent with their unquestioning confidence that Jesus was returning really, really soon.

Paul then argued that the second coming could not be that chronologically close at hand because there were certain events prophesied to occur in this age which had not yet happened. Paul mentioned two such prophesied events: the falling away and the revealing of the man of sin. The Thessalonians knew exactly what Paul was talking about, but discerning his specific meaning is more difficult for us today.

As I said earlier, the falling way, or the apostasy, can refer to a spiritual rebellion or to a political rebellion. Paul did at times refer to a coming spiritual apostasy in the church. For example, he warned the Ephesian elders about this in Acts 20:29-30:

29 "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

30 "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."

Thus Paul did warn about a coming falling away in the Christian church, but the larger context of Paul's statement in 2 Thessalonians points more to a falling away in the Jewish nation. The Jewish rejection of the Messiah was a spiritual rebellion which had already occurred and which was continuing. Because of this spiritual apostasy, the wrath of God was already upon the Jewish nation. Paul mentioned this specifically in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16:

- 14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans,
- 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men,
- 16 forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

God's wrath upon the Jewish nation for their spiritual rebellion would come to expression in the context of the Jewish political rebellion against Rome. The Jewish war with Rome began in A.D. 66, which is about 15 years after Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The "falling away" then could refer to the Jewish political rebellion which would result in the destruction of

Jerusalem by Roman armies. The destruction of Jerusalem in a context of war was an event prophesied to occur in this age before the eschatological “day of Christ.”

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus predicted a coming day when Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and defeated militarily and when the temple would be totally demolished.

Luke 21:5-6

- 5 Then, as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and donations, He said,
6 "These things which you see -- the days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down."

Luke 21:20

- 20 "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near."

Luke 21:24

- 24 "And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."

These things had not yet happened when Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians. Jesus said these things would happen before that adulterous generation which rejected Him had passed away.

Matthew 24:34

34 "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place."

These things were to happen soon, but Paul argued that because the political rebellion which would light the flame of war had not yet happened, the day of Christ could not then be upon them.

Paul mentioned first the falling away and second the revealing of the man of sin. Again, the revealing of the man of sin was something that was prophesied to happen in this age which had then not yet happened. This would be further proof that the "day of Christ" had not yet come.

If the man of sin in 2 Thessalonians 2 was a reference to the Roman emperor, then Paul had to be careful how he expressed himself. He could not safely say this plainly. Back during Paul's first missionary visit to Thessalonica, the Christians had been accused of worshipping another king other than Caesar.

Acts 17:6-7 (at Thessalonica)

6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.

7 "Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king -- Jesus."

The book of Daniel prophesied the rise of four universal pagan empires one after the other: the Babylonian empire, the Medo-Persian empire, the Greek empire and the Roman empire. Paul was living and ministering during the time of this fourth prophesied empire, the Roman empire. The prophecy of Daniel about the Roman empire predicted the rise of a particularly sinful ruler who would speak blasphemous words and persecute the saints:

Daniel 7:25

25 He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, shall persecute the saints of the Most High, and shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand for a time and times and half a time.

When Paul spoke about the revealing of the man of sin as something prophesied for this age which had not yet happened, he could very well have been referring to this prophecy from the book of Daniel. If that is the case, then we have some significant clues as to who the man of sin is. He would be a Roman ruler who would persecute the people of God “for a time and times and half a time,” an expression often interpreted as referring to three and one half years. This clue would point to the Roman emperor Nero, the first emperor to persecute the Christian church. Nero’s persecution began sometime shortly after the great fire of A.D. 64 which destroyed much of Rome and ended with Nero’s death in A.D. 68. Thus, the Neronian persecution lasted approximately three and one half years.

Further clues are found in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7:

- 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.

Here we learn that “the mystery of lawlessness” was already then at work and that the rise of the man of sin was being restrained by an impersonal restraining principle which could be described as a “what” and by a personal restrainer who could be described as a “who.” Let’s see if there is anything related to Nero which corresponds to what Paul there said.

When Paul wrote those words, the Roman emperor was Claudius. In A.D. 49, Claudius married Agrippina, who, together with her son Nero, were the only living direct descendants of Caesar Augustus. In A.D. 50, Agrippina persuaded Claudius to adopt Nero as his son and heir to the throne. In A.D. 53, she arranged Nero’s marriage to Octavia, Claudius’ daughter. When Claudius started expressing a desire to promote his son Britannicus as the next caesar, she poisoned Claudius in A.D. 54. Thus when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians around A.D. 51, the “mystery of lawlessness” was already at work in this effort to secure the throne for Nero. Claudius could therefore be the personal restrainer Paul mentioned, the one who was then restraining the rise of the man of sin.

The impersonal principle of restraint would be the Roman policy of regarding Christianity as a sect of Judaism, which Roman law had recognized as a legally authorized religion since

the time of Julius Caesar. A very significant legal precedent in this regard was set at Corinth about the time Paul wrote his two letters to the Thessalonians while ministering in Corinth:

Acts 18:12-16

- 12 When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat,
- 13 saying, "This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law."
- 14 And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you.
- 15 "But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters."
- 16 And he drove them from the judgment seat.

Gallio was the younger brother of Seneca, the Stoic philosopher who was then the young Nero's tutor and who would later have a very strong influence on Nero during the first five years of his reign. Gallio was also the governor of Achaia or Greece, a significant Roman province. New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce explains the great significance of this ruling:

Gallio's ruling, that the gospel shared the protection which Roman law extended to the Jewish religion, must have served as a precedent for other Roman judges, especially as it proceeded from a man whose brother occupied so

influential a position at the imperial court as did Seneca. It meant that for the next ten or twelve years, until imperial policy toward the Christians underwent a complete reversal "at the highest level," the Christian message could be proclaimed in the provinces of the empire without fear of coming into conflict with Roman law (**Acts**, pp. 375-376).

In A.D. 62, Nero married Poppaea Sabina, an adherent of Judaism. She may have explained to Nero the distinctions between Christianity and Judaism. After the great fire in A.D. 64, Nero decided to blame the Christians and to begin persecuting them. The Neronian Persecution is described for us by the Roman historian Tacitus:

Therefore, in order to suppress the rumor [that Nero had ordered the fire], Nero falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, those persons who, hated for their crimes, were commonly called Christians. The founder of that name, Christus, had been put to death by the procurator of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, in the reign of Tiberius; but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time, broke out again, not only through Judaea, the source of this evil, but also through the city [of Rome], whither all things vile and shameful flow from all quarters, and are encouraged. Accordingly, first, those only were arrested who confessed. Next, on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much of the crime of incendiarism as of hatred of the human race. And in their deaths they were made the subjects of sport; for they were wrapped in the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by

dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set on fire, and when day declined, were burned to serve for nocturnal lights. Nero had offered his own gardens for this spectacle, and also exhibited a chariot race on the occasion, now mingling in the crowd in the dress of a charioteer and actually holding the reins. Whence a feeling of compassion arose toward the sufferers, though justly held to be odious, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but as victims to the ferocity of one man (Schaff, I.387-388).

After the Neronian Persecution, Christianity would no longer have the protection of Roman law until the Edict of Toleration in 311 A.D.

Let's now look at another trait of the man of sin. Daniel spoke of one who would "speak pompous words against the Most High," and Paul said the man of sin would exalt himself above God. There was a caesar cult which worshipped the caesars. The Roman Senate commonly declared the caesars to be gods upon their death beginning with Julius Caesar, and temples were built for their worship. Some of the caesars insisted upon being treated as a god during their lifetime. An extreme example of this attitude is found in Caligula, Nero's uncle and the caesar before Claudius.

According to the Roman historian Suetonius, Caligula ordered that the most famous statues of all gods, including Jupiter, were to be brought from Greece in order to remove their heads and to replace them with his own head. He set up his own temple with a life sized statue to be worshipped. He once stood beside a

statue of Jupiter and asked the tragic actor Apelles which of the two seemed to him the greater. When Apelles hesitated in answering, “Caligula had him flayed with whips.” Caligula even ordered a statue of himself to be put in the temple at Jerusalem for worship, but he died before this was done.

Nero was remembered more for his perverse vices, his extreme cruelty and his narcissistic vanity than for his claims to deity. Still he was one of the caesars exalted by the caesar cult even if he was not the one with the most audacious claims recorded for us in history. Because of his love of singing and chariots, he was compared to Apollo, the god of music and the sun god who raced his chariot across the sky.

The later emperor Domitian combined the outrageous claims to deity associated with Caligula with the persecution of the Christians initiated by Nero. Both Caligula and Domitian delighted in being called *dominus et deus*, Lord and God (Ramsey, **The Church in the Roman Empire**, p. 275).

Domitian’s brother Titus, who was emperor before him, brought Roman idolatry into the very temple at Jerusalem during the Jewish war:

... the Romans brought their standards into the Temple court, and, erecting them opposite the Eastern gate, they sacrificed to them there, and with thundering acclamations hailed Titus imperator [a Roman title given to victorious generals] (Josephus, **The Jewish War**, VI.VI.1 (316)).

Nero as the emperor who first persecuted the church was the individual manifestation of the man of sin. Yet the described traits of the man of sin also found expression in emperors both before and after Nero.

Another characteristic of the man of sin which Paul mentioned was that he would come “according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception” (vv. 9-10). Back when Moses confronted Pharaoh, the Pharaoh had men with occult powers in his service. In Paul’s first missionary journey, he had to deal with a sorcerer who was with a Roman proconsul (Acts 13:6ff). Such men could also have been in the service of the Roman caesar.

Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2 also spoke about Jesus’ judgment of the man of sin:

2 Thessalonians 2:8

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.

Some argue that this verse proves that the man of sin must be a figure who will arise shortly before the return of Christ. That is not necessarily so. In chapter 1, Paul prophesied that God would “repay with tribulation” those who were then troubling the Thessalonian Christians. Paul then referred to the flaming judgment of the second coming, even though that will occur long after all those who were then persecuting the Thessalonians

have died. There is no reason why Paul couldn't describe the judgment of the man of sin in a similar manner. Nero experienced a foretaste of God's judgment in his dishonorable death by suicide in A.D. 68. His full judgment will come at the return of Christ when he will be thrown into the lake of fire.

As I said in the beginning, this passage is one of the more difficult to interpret in the New Testament. As is typical with such passages, no truth essential to our salvation is dependent on our interpreting this passage correctly. The main focus of our study should be on the clearer passages which teach the basics of the faith. Yet we should with humility try to understand even these more difficult passages, passages such as Paul's prophecy of the man of sin.