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The Slaying of Satan's Superman and the Sure Salvation of the Saints:

Paul's Apocalyptic Word of Comfort (2 Thessalonians 2:1-17)

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I. Introduction

("Don't be scared off from preaching on this and other apocalyptic texts!")

The attitude of most preachers toward preaching apocalyptic texts is similar to the way I feel about bungee jumping: It sure is exciting to watch others do it, but there is no way that I am actually going to try it myself! In fact, it is relatively easy for pastors to avoid preaching on these texts. In those churches that do not follow the Common Lectionary and allow the preacher to select the scripture passage, these apocalyptic texts are rarely, if ever, chosen. The situation in those congregations that do follow the Common Lectionary is virtually no different because relatively few biblical passages of apocalyptic material are included in the Lectionary readings.

It is not only preachers, however, who have an aversion to apocalyptic texts: biblical scholars do too. Klaus Koch in a 1970 German work[1] has demonstrated that apocalyptic texts have generally been avoided or ignored by biblical scholarship. The attitude of scholars is reflected in the title of Koch's book, *Ratlos vor der Apokalyptik*, which, though literally translated means "Perplexed by Apocalyptic," can also be rendered "Embarrassed by Apocalyptic."[2] John Collins has more recently observed: "Theologians of a more rational bent are often reluctant to admit that such material [i.e., the apocalyptic material in Daniel and Revelation] played a formative role in early Christianity. There is consequently a prejudice against the apocalyptic literature which is deeply engrained in biblical scholarship."[3]

This aversion to apocalyptic by both preachers and biblical scholars is contrasted sharply with the attitude of those contemporary Christians who are fas-

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[1] K. Koch, *Ratlos vor der Apokalyptik* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1970); English trans., *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (Naperville, Il.: Allenson, 1972).

[2] J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1.

[3] Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 1.

cinated, if not obsessed, with these very same texts. The million plus copies published of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the 5.6 million copies of Edgar Whisenant's *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988*, and the staggering 62 million copies of the Left Behind series, all testify to the ongoing interest in the apocalyptic texts that are such a big part of these books that claim to portray future events in human history.

C. S. Lewis warned that there were two dangers concerning devils: the one danger was to ignore them; the other danger was to pay too much attention to them.[4] In a similar way, there are two dangers concerning apocalyptic texts: on the one hand, preachers and biblical scholars are guilty of ignoring these passages from the Bible; on the other hand, many so-called prophecy experts and contemporary believers are guilty of paying too much attention to these same scriptural passages. In such a context, there is a vital need for pastors to preach apocalyptic texts. God has chosen to reveal himself and his work of redemption in a variety of writing styles or genres, including apocalyptic. Preachers cannot arbitrarily decide that one of these literary forms is either not worthy or not necessary for study, reflection, and proclamation. God speaks in Scripture also through apocalyptic writings, and the people in our congregations need and deserve help in hearing in these texts his divine voice.

In this article, I turn to a passage in Paul's letters where it is commonly recognized that the apostle makes extensive use of apocalyptic images and themes: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17.[5] This passage is a notoriously difficult one. Beverly Gaventa notes: "Readers of the New Testament stumbling for the first time into the middle of 2 Thessalonians may be forgiven if they feel like Alice tumbling down a dark hole in Wonderland. The residents of this Wonderland are new and mysterious, their relationship to one another unclear and the stranger responds with a sense of disorientation."[6] The residents of this wonderland to which Gaventa refers involves such intriguing figures or events as the Man of Lawlessness, who is also called the Son of Destruction, the Apostasy, the Restraining Person, and the Restraining Force, the day of the Lord, and two

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[4] C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* writes, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight" (preface).

[5] E.g., G. Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 95: "For instead of conveying his warning in a clear and definitive form, the Apostle prefers to embody it in a mysterious apocalyptic picture, which has not only no parallel in his own writings, but is unlike anything else in the N.T., unless it be certain passages in the Revelation of St John"; R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 168: "Nowhere in the later Pauline letters does one encounter so thorough a concentration on the apocalyptic future as the center of faith"; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 304: "Nothing in the Pauline letters is closer to the genre of apocalypse."

[6] B. R. Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1998), 107.

parousias or "comings": one by the Man of Lawlessness and one by the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only is the precise meaning of these apocalyptic events and persons difficult to ascertain, the Greek text of this passage contains several grammatical irregularities, incomplete sentences and textual variants. William Neil some years ago made the claim that 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 is "probably the most obscure and difficult passage in the whole of the Pauline correspondence."[7] Those who have wrestled with this passage might justly criticize Neil's claim, not because he is guilty of overstatement but quite the opposite—because he understated the problem by including the word *probably*. Commentators typically appreciate the honesty of the great church leader, Augustine, who after wrestling with this passage, stated: "I frankly confess that the meaning of this completely escapes me."[8]

The difficulty of this passage, however, should not force the modern preacher to flee from this text to safer, more familiar ground. Instead, the challenges of interpreting properly 2 Thessalonians 2 drives home the important principle of "shouting" where Scripture demands that one shouts and "whispering" where Scripture demands that one whispers. In other words, there are many subjects that the Bible addresses frequently and with great clarity, and these are the things that the preacher ought to shout. There are also some subjects that the Bible addresses infrequently and with less clarity, and these are the things that the preacher ought to whisper. Thus it may well be that the preacher ends up whispering to the congregation about the meaning of the diverse characters and events described in 2 Thessalonians 2. Whispering in this situation is not a sign of treating God's Word in a wimpy or wishy-washy manner; rather it is evidence of having such a high respect for the biblical text that one dares not speak more definitively than the text allows.

Even though much in this passage is debatable and open to various interpretations, Paul's overall goal or larger purpose in describing these things to the Thessalonians remains quite clear: to comfort his readers. It is this message of comfort that the preacher must clearly convey or shout to his or her congregation today.

II. The Boundaries of the Passage
("Don't stop reading too soon!")

The first mistake that one can easily make in the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2 is a potentially major one, namely, failing to recognize the proper boundaries of the passage and ending the reading too soon. The *beginning* of the passage at 2:1 is quite clear from a variety of epistolary clues:

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[7] W. Neil, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950), 155. More recently, M. W. Holmes (*1 & 2 Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 228) notes that this passage is "by common consent one of the most obscure in the Pauline corpus."

[8] Augustine, *City of God*, 20.19.

1. The appeal formula "Now we ask you . . . " (ἐρωτῶμεν is a synonym for the more common παρακαλοῦμεν: see 1 Thess. 4:1; 5:12, 14; Phil. 4:2-3) primarily functions in Paul's letters to signal a major transition, either from the end of the thanksgiving to the beginning of the letter body, as is the case here (also 1 Cor. 1:10; Phlem. 8-9), or, as more typically happens, a transition within the letter body (Rom. 12:1; 15:30; 16:7; 1 Cor. 16:15; 2 Cor. 10:1; Phil. 4:2; 1 Thess. 4:1; Eph. 4:1).
2. The vocative ἀδελφοί ("brothers") is an epistolary device in Paul's letters commonly used to introduce a new unit or subunit (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:1, 17; 3:6; 4:1, 13; 5:1, 12; 2 Thess. 2:1, 13, 15; 3:1, 6).
3. The prayer report of 1:11-12, as in Paul's other thanksgivings (Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-14; see also Rom. 1:10b), formally concludes the thanksgiving section of 1:3-12 and so leads the reader to expect the beginning of the letter body in the immediately following verse 2:1.
4. The phrase "but concerning" (ὑπὲρ δέ) in 2:1 may well be a synonym for the epistolary formula περὶ δέ frequently used by Paul to introduce a new topic (1 Thess. 4:9, 13; 5:1; 1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

While the beginning of the passage is clear, the *ending* of the passage is less obvious, with the result that many preachers stop reading after verse 12. This is understandable, given the fact that the editors of the Greek text (NA[26]; GNT[4]) and modern translations (e.g., KJV; NIV; TNIV; RSV; NRSV; JB; NLT) always begin a new paragraph at verse 13 and frequently also add a heading at this point, suggesting that a new section of the letter begins here. The majority of commentators treat verses 1-12 as a complete unit that deals with the topic of the Man of Lawlessness distinct from the following material of verses 13-17 that deals with the different topic of thanksgiving for the Thessalonian readers, thereby downplaying, if not excluding, any connection between these two sections.[9]

Furthermore, the preacher might well be tempted to stop after verse 12 on the grounds that there are more than enough difficult things to talk about in verses 1-12 without adding to this heavy exegetical load by including verses 13-17 as well. In fact, students at Calvin Theological Seminary in the1940s and 1950s used to be rebuked by their professor of homiletics for picking too many

[9] E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972), 311, states about 2:13: "Paul is apparently returning deliberately to the theme of thanksgiving and making a new beginning." I. H. Marshall, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 184: "But it is doubtful whether the whole chapter [2:1-17] should be regarded as one section. It seems best, however, to regard vv. 1-12 as forming a section of teaching, since v. 13 starts afresh in the form of a thanksgiving." See also, e.g., J. E. Frame, *Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1912); F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians,* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1982); L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); E. J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995); A. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians,* Anchor Bible 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 414; G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003); etc.

verses on which to preach on the grounds that it would then be impossible for them to "exhaust the meaning and full riches of the text."[10] This method of selecting only a few verses on which to preach was exemplified in the lives of great pulpiteers such as Martyn Lloyd Jones who took two years to preach through the Sermon on the Mount, eight years to preach through Ephesians, and thirteen years to preach through Romans,[11] thereby not only exhausting the "meaning and full riches of the text" but no doubt also those sitting in the pew week and after week listening to him.

While ending the reading at verse 12 may be understandable, it is clearly wrong. There are a number of indisputable links between verses 1-12 and verses 13-17—links that demonstrate Paul's intention that the whole of chapter two be read together as a literary unit. What is at stake here is not merely a technical debate among scholars as to where the passage ends but, as I will spell out shortly, the key to discovering Paul's overall and thus primary purpose in this discussion, namely, to comfort his Thessalonian readers. The reasons for extending the reading to the end of the chapter at verse 17 are as follows:

1. There is a verbal *inclusio* between verse 2 ("either by a spiritual utterance or by a word or by a letter supposedly from us") and verse 15 ("either by a word or by a letter from us"). The connection between these two verses is strengthened by not just the repetition of the two prepositional phrases (the omission of the first prepositional phrase in verse 15 is significant) but the same order of these prepositional phrases.
2. There is a thematic *inclusio* between the problem of mental *instability* articulated in verse 2 ("not to be easily shaken in mind or alarmed") and the solution of mental *stability* in both the command of verse 15 ("Stand firm and hold fast!") and the prayer of verse 17 (May Jesus and God "strengthen" you). That the command to mental stability in verse 15 does indeed look back to the problem of mental instability in verse 2 is supported by the two particles Ἄρα οὖν ("So then") that introduce this command—particles that elsewhere draw a conclusion based on what has been said beforehand (see also Rom. 8:12; 14:12, 19; Gal. 6:10; 1 Thess. 5:6). That the prayer for mental stability in verse 17 also does in fact look back to the earlier problem of mental instability is supported by a striking parallel in the first letter: just as Paul's prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 that the Lord "strengthen your hearts" (στηρίξαι ὑμῶν τὰς καρδίας) looks back to the earlier problem in 1 Thessalonians 3:3 that "no one be shaken in these trials," so also Paul's prayer in

[10] This was reported to me by Rev. Andrew Zylstra, who graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1953.

[11] John Brencher, *Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) and Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 28. Lloyd-Jones also spent six years preaching on the early chapters of the gospel of John, three years on the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, and additionally had many "short" series.

2 Thessalonians 2:17 that the Lord "strengthen your hearts" (ὑμῶν τὰς καρδίας . . . στηρίξαι) looks back to the earlier problem in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 that the Thessalonians are "shaken in mind and alarmed."

3. There are a couple of significant contrasts between the description of *unbelievers* in verses 3-12 and that of the Thessalonian *believers* in verses 13-17.[12] A sharp contrast is created between the two groups through the use of the word pair, truth and lie. Whereas unbelievers are said to "not receive the love of the truth" (v. 10b: τὴν ἀγάπην τῆς ἀληθείας οὐκ ἐδέξαντο), "to believe the lie" (v. 11a: εἰς τὸ πιστεῦσαι τῷ ψεύδει) and are "those who do not believe the truth" (v. 12: οἱ μὴ πιστεύσαντες τῇ ἀληθείᾳ), the Thessalonian Christians have been chosen by God through their "belief in the truth" (v. 13b: ἐν . . . πίστει ἀληθείας). This contrast between the two groups is further heightened with another word pair: to be destroyed and to be saved/salvation. Whereas unbelievers are "those who are being destroyed" (v. 10a: τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις) and who do not accept the truth "so that they may be saved" (v. 10b: εἰς τὸ σωθῆναι αὐτούς), the Thessalonian Christians are elected by God as firstfruits "for salvation" (v. 13b: εἰς σωτηρίαν).
4. There is a parallel between the structure of Paul's argument in the first letter and that found here in 2:1-17. Just as the two interconnected problems of Paul's absence and the Thessalonians' persecution in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10 is concluded with two prayers in 3:11-13 (optative mood) and followed by the phrase, "Finally, brothers" in 4:1, which introduces the next topic, so the problem of the false claim about the day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-15 is concluded with a prayer in 2:16-17 (optative mood) and followed by the phrase "Finally, brothers" in 3:1, which introduces the next topic.

Determining the proper ending of Paul's argument in 2 Thessalonians 2 is of crucial importance for properly discerning his primary purpose in this discussion. If one reads only up to verse 12, the passage closes with *a note of judgment for unbelievers*. In fact, the final three verses speak in a very sobering way about those who "are being destroyed because they did not receive the truth in order that they might be saved" and how "on account of this God sends to them a work of deception in order that they might believe the lie so that all those who do not believe the truth but take pleasure in wickedness may be condemned" (vv. 10b-12). If, however, one reads all the way to verse 17, the passage closes with *a note of comfort for the Thessalonian Christians*. In sharp contrast to the doom facing their unbelieving fellow citizens, they are comforted by the knowledge that God has elected them to receive not judgment but salvation. That Paul's overall purpose in this passage is to comfort his Thessalonian readers can be seen in his closing prayer of verses 16-17 which contains a double reference to

[12] So also C. H. Giblin, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-examination of 2 Thessalonians 2* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 46-48.

comfort: "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal *comfort* (the noun παράκλησιν) and good hope through grace, *comfort* (the cognate verb in the optative παρακαλέσαι) your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (vv. 16-17).

A proper understanding of where the passage ends, therefore, is an important corrective to so-called prophecy experts who approach this passage as a blueprint for spelling out what will happen in the future. A preacher who concentrates only on the words of verses 1-12 and mines them merely for clues about what yet must take place misses and even worse violates Paul's primary purpose in this passage—a purpose that becomes clear from verses 13-17. The apostle's first and foremost intention is not to *predict* but to *pastor*.[13] To a young congregation that is persecuted by their unbelieving fellow citizens and frightened by a false claim that the day of the Lord had come, Paul speaks words of comfort. As Gaventa notes about the closing prayer of verses 16-17: "Throughout this chapter [2 Thess. 2], the writer has attempted to strengthen and *comfort* Christians who have been frightened out of their wits by false announcements of the day of the Lord. Finally, however, the acknowledgment comes that God is the one who grants *comfort* and hope and strength."[14]

III. The Structure of the Passage ("Don't miss the forest for the trees!")

In addition to determining the proper boundaries of the passage, it is also important to discover its internal structure. The concern here is not to engage in what might colloquially be called "army" exegesis, that is, "marching" through the passage in a verse-by-verse manner. Although this approach is commendable in so far as it results in the preacher's sticking to the biblical text instead wandering off into a myriad of human-interest stories and humorous anecdotes, it nevertheless suffers from the danger of missing the forest for the trees. In other words, the preacher must guard against getting so caught up with explaining the specific details about the Man of Lawlessness, the Apostasy, the Restraining Person, and the Restraining Force, and the other apocalyptic events and characters found in this chapter that the audience misses the larger concern of the passage as a whole.

The argument of Paul in this chapter consists of five discernable parts. For those preachers who find pneumonic devices helpful for their parishioners to follow along, I have attached headings to each of these five sections that involve alliteration:

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[13] Giblin (*Threat to Faith*, 41) perceptively observes: "What seems to have been neglected in studying this passage is attention to the repeated subordination of apocalyptic flights to a point of pastoral concern or pastoral reaction. Paul seems to be more concerned with the pastoral problem of correcting the Thessalonians' outlook than he is with describing the coming of the Antichrist or even the coming of the Lord."

[14] Gaventa, *Thessalonians*, 123 (emphasis is mine).

1. Verses 1-2 introduce the *crisis* that the rest of the passage seeks to address. Here we discover that the Thessalonian Christians are frightened out of their wits over a false claim that the day of the Lord has come.
2. Verses 3-12 consist of Paul's *correction* of this false claim, which is the source of the Thessalonians' fear. The day of the Lord cannot have come because (note the causal ὅτι that opens this unit in verse 3) this future event will not take place until certain clearly defined events occur first, foremost of which involves the appearance and destruction of the Man of Lawlessness, who for the present time is being restrained. It is this second section of verses 3-12 that is referred to in the first part of my article's lengthy title: "The Slaying of Satan's Superman."
3. Verses 13-14, which involve the *comfort*, are set apart from the preceding material in three ways: (1) the personal pronoun "we" emphasized both by its mere presence (since the subject is already expressed in the verb "we ought") and its location at the head of the sentence, thereby signaling the shift from the fate of the Man of Lawlessness and his deceived followers to that of the Thessalonian Christians; (2) the soft adversative particle δέ (but); and (3) the vocative phrase "brothers loved by the Lord." Here Paul gives thanks to God that, in sharp contrast to those unbelievers who are perishing, the Christians in Thessalonica are sure to receive "salvation"—a salvation that is guaranteed by God's prior work of choosing (v. 13) and calling (v. 14) them. It is this third section that accounts for the second part of my article's title: "The Sure Salvation of the Saints."
4. Verse 15, which is the *command*, marks another shift in the argument as witnessed by three clues: (1) another occurrence of the transitional marker, the vocative ἀδελφοί (brothers); (2) the use of the double particles ἄρα οὖν in which "ἄρα expresses the inference and οὖν the transition"[15]; and (3) the shift from the indicative mood that predominates the preceding verses to the double imperative in this verse. Paul here begins to bring his discussion to a close with two concluding commands that offer the solution to the crisis introduced in verses 1-2. If the problem is mental instability ("easily shaken in mind or alarmed") due to a *new* claim about the day of the Lord likely through a spiritual utterance that claims the authority of Paul, the solution is to "stand firm and hold fast" to those traditions that he has *previously* taught them in a spoken word or written letter.
5. Verses 16-17 consist of the *closing* and are formally distinct from the rest of the material in the passage in that they make use of the optative mood and constitute a prayer or benediction that is always used elsewhere by the apostle to bring a discussion to a definitive close (Rom. 15:5-6; 15:13; 1 Thess.

[15] BDAG 127.2b. See also Rom. 5:19; 7:3, 25; 8:12; 9:16, 18; 14:12, 19; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Thess. 5:6; 2 Clement 8:6; 14:3.

3:11, 12-13; 2 Thess. 3:5).[16] Like the immediately preceding command of verse 15, the prayer of verses 16-17 also looks back to the problem of mental instability introduced at the beginning of the chapter. To a congregation frightened by a new claim that the day of the Lord has come, Paul offers a prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ and the God who gives "eternal comfort" may "comfort" their hearts. It is this closing prayer that captures Paul's overall purpose in the passage and explains the third part of my article's title: "Paul's Apocalyptic Word of Comfort."

IV. The Interpretation of the Passage
("Don't calculate the future but comfort the church!")

The two preliminary steps that we have taken thus far in approaching 2 Thessalonians 2, namely, determining the proper boundaries of the passage and its internal structure, have been crucial in discovering Paul's overall purpose in this passage. As we now leave these preliminary steps and move on to an analysis of the text itself, we face a variety of exegetical challenges that have humbled more than one commentator into confessions of ignorance about Paul's meaning. The difficulties of this passage, therefore, require us to be at our hermeneutical best, that is, to approach this text as we would any part of Scripture, taking full cognizance of the grammatical, literary, historical, and theological principles that ought to play a role in the interpretation of God's Word. Or, to use the colloquial expression coined by one of our Calvin Seminary's graduates: we need to be "exegetical ninjas"[17] whose hermeneutical skills are working at their highest level. Of course, time constraints, not only in a sermon but even in a lengthier article such as this, do not allow us to comment on everything in 2 Thessalonians 2. Good preachers know that you can not bring everything to the pulpit; some things discovered in the study must be "left behind." Consequently, I will present only an overview or "Cliff's Notes" version of the major exegetical issues faced in this passage, concentrating throughout in showing how the five sections serve Paul's primary purpose, which is pastoral, namely, to comfort believers.

A. The Crisis (vv. 1-2)

It is no exaggeration to say that the Thessalonian church was facing a crisis. In other words, Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2 is not merely satisfying their curiosity about eschatological matters but rather is providing desperately needed pastoral comfort to believers who were frightened and unsure about their salva-

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[16] See J. A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 101-4.

[17] Rev. Peter Jonker, unpublished address given at the All Seminary Retreat, Calvin Theological Seminary, September 5, 2003.

tion. The seriousness of the situation is suggested by the facts that this subject matter is the first thing that the apostle discusses in the letter body and also that he goes to great lengths to treat this matter. In fact, the other subjects taken up in the letter—their unjust suffering described in the opening thanksgiving of chapter 1 and their ongoing problem with rebelliously idle members described in chapter 3—almost certainly are connected with the problem taken up here in chapter 2.[18]

The crisis centers on a deceptively simple claim found at the end of verse 2: "The day of the Lord has come." The exegetical issue here is whether the main verb ἐνέστηκεν, which is in the perfect tense, conveys the *presence* of the day of the Lord (i.e., the day of the Lord has already happened) or its *imminence* (i.e., the day of the Lord is about to happen). Some have found the first notion of presence impossible on the grounds that the events surrounding the parousia or second coming of Christ are far too dramatic and public to be missed by the Thessalonian believers and thus argue for the translation "The day of the Lord *is at hand*" (KJV) or even better "*is just at hand*" (ASV).[19]

The second notion of imminence, however, suffers from even more weighty objections. First, the perfect tense in general highlights a past action that has present, not imminent, significance. Second, the exact same verb ἐνίστημι occurs five additional times in Paul's letters, four of which are also, as here in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, in the perfect tense. In two of these additional occurrences, the apostle uses the perfect to distinguish carefully between "things present" and "things to come" (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 3:22), and the two remaining occurrences similarly refer to a present reality, not an imminent one (1 Cor.

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[18] G. D. Fee (*God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994, 71) argues that 2 Thessalonians 2 is the most crucial in the letter because "it serves as the primary occasion for the letter. Indeed, the other concerns—their unjust suffering (ch. 1) and the continuing difficulty with the 'unruly idle' (ch. 3)—are best understood as related to this one. Whatever some of them had come to believe about 'the day of the Lord' (see 1 Thess. 5:1-11), it had resulted in their being shaken with regard to their present sufferings and had caused others to take a dim view toward 'working with their own hands.'" Although not all commentators connect the topics of suffering (chap. 1) and idleness (chap. 3) with the false claim concerning the day of the Lord (chap. 2), there is a consensus that the second chapter constitutes the primary reason why 2 Thessalonians was written: e.g., H. Ohlshausen, *Biblical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1851), 470; E. von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicherbriefe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909), 261; K. Staab, *Die Thessalonicherbriefe. Die Gefangenshaftsbriefe* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1965), 50; Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 162; Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 427.

[19] See esp. A. M. G. Stephenson, "On the Meaning of ενεστηκεν ἡ ἡμερα του κυριου in 2 Thessalonians 2.2," *Studia Evangelica* 4 (1968): 442-51. Also B. B. Warfield, "The Prophecies of St. Paul. I - 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *The Expositor* 3rd Series 4 (1886): 37; J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 110; von Dobschütz, *Thessalonicherbriefe*, 267-68; Dibelius, *Thessalonicherbriefe*, 29; A. Oepke, "ἐνίστημι," *TDNT* 2.544: "in process of coming"; L. J. L. Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 73-74; G. L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 305.

7:26 "present crisis"; Gal. 1:4 "present evil age"). Third, the perfect form of ἐνίστημι describes a present reality in other documents of that day, including the letter to the Hebrews (9:9), the writings of Philo and Josephus, and the Epistle of Barnabas, as well as in the Septuagint, classical literature, and the papyri.[20] Fourth, if Paul had, in fact, intended to describe the imminence of the day of the Lord and not its presence, it may be asked why he did not employ the verb ἐγγίζω ("to draw near"), with which he is clearly familiar, using it elsewhere to say about the day of the Lord: "The day is near" (Rom. 13:12; see also Phil. 2:30). This last text raises a fifth and final point, namely, Paul *agrees* with the claim that the day of the Lord is "imminent" or "near" (Rom. 13:12; also 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 1:5-10; 2:1) and thus would not warn the Thessalonians against anyone deceiving them with such an assertion (2 Thess. 2:3). By contrast, a claim that the day of the Lord has already come is a position that the apostle rejects and seeks to correct in the second major section of this passage, verses 3-12. These are the key reasons why the vast majority of Bible translations and commentators render the false claim that was frightening the Thessalonians as "the day of the Lord has come."

This conclusion, however, raises the problem of how the Thessalonians could be disturbed by a claim that was so clearly false. After all, it would have been obvious to them that none of their fellow believers who had "fallen asleep" had been resurrected (1 Thess. 4:14, 16), that "sudden destruction" had not yet fallen on their unbelieving neighbors (1 Thess. 5:3), and that there had been no "cry of command, voice of the archangel or trumpet call of God" to signal the glorious parousia of Christ (1 Thess. 4:16). Why, then, would the Thessalonian church be so severely shaken about a bizarre claim that "the day of the Lord has come"?

Most commentators conclude that the Christians in Thessalonica likely did not understand the day of the Lord to be a single and instantaneous happening but a complex number of events of which Christ's parousia was just one part.[21] The claim that "the day of the Lord has come," therefore, would be interpreted by the Thessalonians to mean that the series of events connected with that eschatological day had begun to unfold and that "the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him" (2 Thess. 2:1) was about to take place.

Whereas in the first letter this hope in Christ's imminent return and in believers' reunion with him was a message that comforted the Thessalonians (1 Thess 4:18, 5:11), here in the second letter, it is a message that causes them

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[20] For specific texts, see C. R. Nicoll, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica. Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, SNTSMS 126 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 116, nn. 4, 5, 6, 7, 9.

[21] So, e.g., Frame, *Thessalonians*, 248; Best, *Thessalonians*, 279; Morris, *Thessalonians*, 217; Marshall, *Thessalonians*, 186; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 240; Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 301, n 37. For objections, see Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair*, 117.

to be "quickly shaken from their mind and alarmed" (2:2a), or in idiomatic terms, to be "scared out of their wits."[22] The false claim, however, did not concern the parousia, which the Thessalonians eagerly anticipated, but the day of the Lord, which the Thessalonians apparently viewed with some nervousness and apprehension. A variety of factors in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 suggest that the believers in Thessalonica were not merely curious about the timing of the day of the Lord (as the opening phrase "about times and dates" might imply) but rather worried whether they would avoid the wrath connected with that future day and instead experience salvation. This fear stemmed from the day of the Lord concept in the Old Testament, where, though it refers to a future time when God would come both to punish the wicked and to vindicate his people, the notion of judgment is more commonly stressed than that of deliverance (e.g., Isa. 2:1-4:6; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 30:2-3; Obad. 15; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31-32; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:14-18; Zech. 14). In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, then, Paul responds to his readers' anxiety by asserting that, though the day of the Lord will indeed involve a sudden destruction from which there will certainly be no escape (v. 3), they as believers need not fear this eschatological event because they have been elected by God "not for wrath but for the obtaining of salvation" (v. 9). It is striking to note that Paul comforts his readers with exactly the same line of reasoning in 2 Thessalonians 2, namely, that God has elected and called them as "firstfruits for salvation" (vv. 13-14).

Given this already existing apprehension about their fate on the day of the Lord, it is perhaps not surprising that the Thessalonian church reacted with fear to the claim that this eschatological day of judgment had already come. Furthermore, as revealed in the classic fable "Chicken Little" in which Henny Penny has an acorn fall on her head and immediately runs around yelling "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!,"[23] fear is often as irrational as it is contagious. Thus, even though the claim "the day of the Lord has come" may have seemed obviously false, it nevertheless caused the young church of Thessalonica to be scared out of their wits, fearful of whether they would avoid the wrath connected with that day of judgment and instead experience salvation.

B. The Correction (vv. 3-12)

Paul corrects the false claim by reminding them of what he previously taught them (v. 5) and what they therefore already know (v. 6), namely, the day of the Lord cannot come until certain clearly defined events occur. That the apostle in his correction of the false claim is not really saying anything new to the Thessalonians is also indicated by his comment in the first letter that he had no

[22] Bruce (*Thessalonians*, 161, 163) renders the Greek as "shaken out of your wits"; Giblin (*Threat to Faith*, 244) uses the contemporary expression "lost their head."

[23] Gaventa, *Thessalonians*, 123.

real need to write to them about the day of the Lord; they already well know about this eschatological day (1 Thess. 5:1-2), and this knowledge will result in that day not surprising them like a thief (5:4). This knowledge that the Thessalonians already had about the coming apostasy and Man of Lawlessness is also revealed in the imperfect tense of the verb ἔλεγον in verse 5 of our passage that highlights the customary or repeated nature of the action: "I was telling you these things." Paul obviously had devoted more than one sermon to this eschatological subject during his mission-founding ministry in Thessalonica. Furthermore, the apostle introduces the question of verse 5 with the negative οὐ, which changes it from an ambiguous question into one that expects a positive answer: "You remember, don't you, that, when I was with you, I was telling you these things?"

The modern reader of 2 Thessalonians 2, therefore, is walking into the middle of a conversation between Paul and the Thessalonian believers that has a rather extensive history. If we, then, struggle at times to understand what the apostle is talking about, we ought not to conclude that Paul is engaged in poor reasoning or that our exegetical abilities are embarrassingly weak. The difficulties in interpretation stem from the simple but important fact that the already existing knowledge that the Thessalonians have about the eschatological events leading up to the day of the Lord allow Paul to speak about these things in an elliptical manner that they could easily understand but we cannot.

A further reason why Paul's correction in verses 3-12 is difficult for us to grasp fully stems from the fact that he does not present events in a chronological matter but alternates a future-present pattern.[24] The apostle begins in verses 3-4 with the future, describing what has to happen first before the day of the Lord comes, namely, the apostasy and the Man of Lawlessness. After reminding the Thessalonians in verse 5 that they know these things from his previous preaching ministry among them, Paul proceeds in verses 6-7 to talk about the present time (note the adverbs "now" [v. 6] and "already" [v. 7]) in which lawlessness is already at work but there is both a restraining person and a restraining force that prevents the human embodiment and climax of that lawlessness, the Man of Lawlessness, from coming on the scene. Verses 8-10 move ahead again in time to the future (note the opening adverb "then" [v. 8]) when there will occur two parousias: first, the coming of the Man of Lawlessness, second, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, in verses 11-12, Paul moves back to the present, describing the judgment of unbelievers. This alternating temporal shift between the future and the present suggests that Paul is not interested in spelling out a detailed "timetable of apocalyptic events"[25]—something that many modern "prophecy experts" are very much

[24] So Marshall, *Thessalonians*, 185. See also Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 414.

[25]Contra F. W. Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians*, JSNTSS 30 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 58.

interested in discovering in this text—but rather in proving to the Thessalonians that the claim about the day of the Lord's being present cannot be true.

1. Future (vv. 3-4): Apostasy and Man of Lawlessness

The first section of Paul's correction (vv 3-4) looks ahead to the future and addresses straightaway the heart of the Thessalonians' fear. The day of the Lord cannot have come because that eschatological day of judgment will not take place until two events take place first: the apostasy comes and the Man of Lawlessness is revealed. The first of these future events is the apostasy, that is, a rebellion against God that is primarily religious in nature but may also involve a revolt against public order and the laws of society. Other New Testament texts similarly portray the end times as a period marked by rebellion against God, an increase of wickedness, and the activity of false religious leaders who seek to lead the elect away from God (Matt. 24:6-14; Mark 13:3-23; 1 Tim. 4:1-4; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; Jude 17-19).

The second of these future events is the Man of Lawlessness who apparently emerges out of the apostasy to become its leader, the one in whom the rebellion reaches its climax. This figure is not Satan himself, as verse 9 makes clear, but is the servant of Satan, or as the title of this article identifies him, "Satan's Superman." He is typically identified with the Antichrist (1 John 2:19, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7) as well as the unnamed figure or figures who are expected to arise against Jesus prior to the time of his return (Matt. 24:5, 23-24; Mark 13:21-22; Luke 21:8; Rev. 13).

Although Paul's description of this superman of Satan has similarities with a number of Old Testament texts, the closest parallels are found in that part of Daniel's prophecy that finds its initial fulfillment in the desecration of the Jerusalem temple by Antiochus IV who set up an altar to the pagan god Zeus in the Holy or Holies.[26] The title "Man of Lawlessness" (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας) may be influenced by Daniel 12:10, which describes the apostasy at the end of time as a period when "the lawless ones will do lawlessness, and all the lawless ones will not understand (ἀνομήσωσιν ἄνομοι, καὶ οὐ συνήσουσι πάντες ἄνομοι)."[27] Paul's subsequent description of this lawless figure as "the one who opposes

[26] G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930), 111, comments: "That Paul in 2 Thess. ii is dependent on Daniel hardly requires pointing out." So also H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 512; Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 206-7; also his *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 273-74.

[27] So Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 206. A similar reference to the "lawless ones" is found in Daniel 11:32. Other Old Testament parallels may include Psalm 89 [LXX 88]:22 ("The enemy shall have no advantage against him, and the son of lawlessness shall not hurt him") and Isaiah 57:3-4 ("But as for you, come here, you sons of lawlessness . . . Are you not children of destruction, a lawless seed?").

and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship" (v. 4a) parallels closely Daniel 11:36 where it is prophesied that a future king "will exalt and magnify himself above every god." The statement that the Man of Lawlessness will "take his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God" (v. 4b) agrees with Daniel 11:31, which similarly locates the activity of this eschatological enemy in the temple: "Forces will be sent by him, and they will desecrate the temple fortress, and will remove the daily sacrifice and will set up the abomination that causes desolation."[28] Paul's reference to the apostasy echoes in a general way what is described in Daniel 11, where some of God's people "forsake the holy covenant" (11:30) and "the lawless ones will establish a covenant by deceitful ways" (11:32 LXX).[29] The desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV as prophesied in Daniel was subsequently kept alive in Jewish and early Christian thinking through various rulers who also attempted to desecrate the Jerusalem sanctuary: the Roman general Pompey entered the Holy of Holies in 63 B.C.; the emperor Gaius Caligula considered himself to be a god and consequently attempted in A.D. 40 to have his statue erected in the Jerusalem temple.

Paul, therefore, is employing a familiar theme to portray the supreme evil character of the coming Lawless One and his usurpation of God's place in the world. This is not to say that Paul himself is necessarily drawing on the Daniel material. The striking parallels between 2 Thessalonians 2 and eschatological teachings of Jesus as recorded in the synoptic gospels[30] suggest that the apostle is more likely drawing from traditional material of early Christian eschatology that was based on the teaching of Jesus, who in turn incorporated the prophecy of Daniel in expounding his own views of the end times.

2. Present (vv 6-7): The Restraining Thing/Person and the Mystery of Lawlessness

The second section of Paul's correction (vv 6-7) shifts the temporal perspective from what must take place "first" in the future before the day of the Lord comes to what is currently taking place "now" (v. 6) and "already" (v. 7). The apostle states two times that the Man of Lawlessness and the rebellion associated with his appearance are presently being "held back" or "restrained." Paul refers first in verse 6 to the *thing* (the neuter τὸ κατέχον) that is restraining and then in the immediately following verse refers to the *person* (the masculine ὁ

[28] There are other Old Testament texts that address the divine pretensions of various kings: Ezekiel 28:2 involves a condemnation of the king of Tyre for claiming to be divine; Isaiah 14:13 taunts the king of Babylon for elevating himself to the realm of the divine.

[29] Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 111; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 512; Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 207.

[30] See J. B. Orchard, "Thessalonians and the Synoptic Gospels," *Biblica* 19 (1938): 19-42; D. Ford, *The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979), 198; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Future* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 233; Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted*, trans. N. Tomkinson, (Gleerup: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1966), 194; David Wenham, *The Rediscovery of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 179.

κατέχων) who is restraining. At least eight different suggestions have been made to solve the "riddle of the restrainer," that is, to identity this restraining thing and this restraining person:[31]

(a) the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor
(b) the principle of law and order and the political leaders in general
(c) the proclamation of the gospel and the proclaimer (Paul or other missionaries)
(d) the power of God and God himself
(e) the Jewish state and James of Jerusalem
(f) the presence of the church and the Holy Spirit
(g) the force of evil and Satan
(h) the false prophecy and the false prophet

There is a wide consensus that the restraining influence is positive and beneficial, which eliminates the last two proposals. A tentative choice from the remaining options might be a variation of the fourth one listed above, namely, the power of God and God himself. The variation of this view is that the restrainer is not God himself operating directly but the power of God at work in his angelic representative, Michael.[32] The strength of this possibility rests on the allusions in this passage to Daniel 10-12 where the angel Michael, the patron angel of the Jews, is said to withstand (restrain?) the evil patron angels of Israel's enemies, Persia and Greece (Dan. 10:13-14, 20-21; 12:1).

3. Future (vv 8-10): The Coming of the Man of Lawlessness and His Deceived Followers

The third section of Paul's correction (vv. 8-10) returns to the future (note the opening adverb "then" in verse 8): once the restrainer has been removed, then the mystery of lawlessness that has been held somewhat in check will be free to manifest itself fully, the apostasy or religious rebellion will take place, and the Man of Lawlessness will make his grand and dreadful appearance. Paul apparently finds it impossible to say anything further about the revelation of this superman of Satan before first describing in the same sentence this evil one's defeat: "whom the Lord Jesus will slay by the breath of his mouth and destroy by the appearance of his coming" (v 8b). The apostle here borrows imagery from Isaiah 11:4 (LXX), though there are a number of biblical and intertestamental passages that similarly refer to the destruction of the wicked by

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[31] Many commentaries contain a detailed explanation and evaluation of these proposals. See, e.g., Marshall, *Thessalonians*, 196-99; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 250-52; L. Morris, "Man of Lawlessness and Restraining Power," *DPL* 592-94.

[32] See especially C. Nicholl, "Michael, the Restrainer Removed," *Journal of Theological Studies 51* (2000): 25-53. Also Beale, *Thessalonians*, 216-17.

[33] Job 4:9; Ps. 134:17; Isa. 30:27-28; *1 Enoch* 14:2; 62:2; 84:1; 4 Ezra 13:10-11; *Pss. Sol.* 17:24, 25; Rev. 19:15.

means of breath or the force of the mouth.[33] It is only when the defeat of this Lawless One has been described that Paul proceeds to speak about the deceptive manner of this evil one's coming which, in keeping with the deceitful and evil character of the one whom he represents—Satan—is "accompanied by all power and signs and false wonders and by all deceit of wickedness."

The apostle does not spend much time, however, on the coming and evil work of this superman of Satan[34] but instead shifts his attention to those who are deceived by his false signs and wonders, those who are identified as "on the way to destruction because they did not receive the love of the truth so that they might be saved" (vv. 10b). The likely reason for this shift from the Man of Lawlessness to his deceived followers is that these folks are the ones who are persecuting the Thessalonian church.[35] Though the problem of persecution is not explicitly raised in our passage, it is a major theme in the immediately preceding chapter and thus very much still in the mind of the apostle and his readers. As will be made clear below, Paul's description of the coming destruction that will fall upon not only the Man of Lawless but also his followers who are persecuting the believers in Thessalonica is ultimately a message of comfort to the apostle's readers, because this future judgment will vindicate their faith, punish their enemies, and demonstrate that God is just.

4. Present (vv 11-12): The Judgment of Unbelievers

The fourth section of Paul's correction (vv. 11-12) continues his description of those unbelievers who will face destruction but shifts the time perspective from their future judgment to God's present working in their lives. As a consequence of their rejection of the truth of the gospel (v. 11a: "and because of this . . . "), God encourages such rebellious behavior by sending[36] "a work of deception," that is, a spiritual blindness that causes them to not believe the truth of the gospel but instead to take pleasure in wickedness.

With so many tough, exegetical issues facing the preacher in verses 3-12, it is all too easy to lose sight of the important function that this second section plays in the overall argument of chapter 2. Though the *immediate* purpose of this section is to correct the false claim that the day of the Lord had come, the

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[34] Holmes, *Thessalonians*, 244-45: "The pattern Paul models here—he keeps this primary focus on Jesus and speaks of Antichrist no more than he has to—is a pattern we would do well to follow. When novels about Antichrist [Left Behind] outsell books about Jesus, it seems to me that there is something seriously out of balance. Christ our Savior, not Antichrist, his antagonist, deserves our attention."

[35] Gaventa (*Thessalonians*, 115-16) rightly observes that Paul has two distinct but related targets in view: not only the anxiety of the Thessalonian Christians over the false claim that the day of the Lord had come but also the problem of persecution: "Although the second target is not explicitly identified, there does seem to be one, namely, those who are afflicting the church."

[36] Although some manuscripts have the future πέμψει (ℵ²D²YMaj it vg^{cl} sa^{mss} bo; Ambst), the oldest and most reliable witnesses have the present πέμπει (ℵ* A B D* F G 6 33 1739 1881 *pc* b vgst sa^{ms}; Tert). The present tense is also the more difficult and thus preferred reading.

ultimate purpose is to comfort the Thessalonians who were frightened by this claim. At first glance, this ultimate purpose may be difficult to see. After all, how can Paul's reminder about the coming apostasy and the Man of Lawlessness and the punishment of those who foolishly follow him be comforting?

On further reflection, however, it becomes clear that the apostle's words mean that God is indeed just and will not only reward the righteous but also punish the wicked. This message would be especially comforting to the Thessalonian Christians who, as the opening thanksgiving makes clear, were enduring increased persecution (1:4, 6-7) at the hands of their unbelieving fellow citizens (1 Thess. 2:14).[37] In fact, Paul stresses in that first chapter the just character of God by using the Greek root δικ- ("just") no less than four times: "This is evidence of the *just* judgment of God" (1:5); "it is *just* for God to pay back trouble to those who are troubling you and rest to you who are troubled" (1:6-7a); "giving *justice* to those who do not know God" (1:8a); and "they will receive *justice*, namely, eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from his mighty glory" (1:9).

For us Western believers who know embarrassingly little about suffering for our Christian faith, it is difficult to hear the note of comfort in Paul's words. We read about the slaying of the Man of Lawlessness and the judgment on all those who are deceived by his false signs and wonders and perhaps accuse the apostle of being judgmental and unduly harsh. Persecuted Christians, however, hear Paul's words and are comforted by the fact that God is just and that their faith will one day be vindicated.

You can hear this note of comfort, for example, in the words of Guido de Brès, author of the Belgic Confession of 1561. Writing from a jail cell in a time when Protestant Christians endured a most terrible persecution by the Roman Catholic government, de Brès wrote the following about the final judgment in Article 37 of his confession:

> Therefore, with good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to wicked and evil people. But it is very pleasant and a *great comfort* to the righteous and the elect, since their total redemption will then be accomplished. They will then receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all; and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil one who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.

Apparently, beauty is not the only thing that is in the eye of the beholder; comfort is too. Those who are persecuted for no other reason than their belief in Jesus see comfort in a final judgment that vindicates their faith, punishes their enemies, and thus demonstrates that God is indeed just.

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[37] The suffering endured by the Thessalonians started from the moment of their conversion (1 Thess. 1:6; 22; see Acts 17:5-7), continued during Paul's absence and the later visit of Timothy (1 Thess. 3:1-5), and increased at the time that 2 Thessalonians was written (2 Thess. 1:4-7).

It is interesting to note that in the debate over how to define apocalyptic some scholars have stressed not only the hortatory but also the consoling or comforting function that such writings have. David Hellhom, for example, has proposed that the widely accepted definition of an apocalypse given in *Semeia* 14 be emended by the following addition: an apocalypse is "intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation *and/or consolation* by means of divine authority."[38] John Collins, an expert in apocalyptic writings, concurs with this addition, noting that the "functions of exhortation and consolation can generally be maintained for the Jewish apocalypses."[39]

That Paul is concerned with this consoling or comforting function in 2 Thessalonians 2 is supported by the two passages in his first letter to the Thessalonians where he also deals with eschatological matters, and, where many believe, he also employs apocalyptic themes and metaphors. His discussion in 4:13-18 concerning the status of deceased believers at Christ's return concludes with the exhortation, "Comfort one another with these words" (4:18), while his discussion in 5:1-11 concerning the status of living believers on the day of the Lord similarly ends with the command: "Comfort one another and build each other up" (5:11). Thus, even though the immediate function of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 is to correct the false claim about the day of the Lord that frightened the Thessalonian believers, the ultimate purpose of this section ought to be seen in light of Paul's concern in the second chapter as a whole, namely, to comfort his shaken and fearful readers.

C. The Comfort (vv. 13-14)

If Paul's ultimate purpose of comfort is only implicitly at work in his correction of verses 3-12, it becomes much more explicit in his thanksgiving of verses 13-14. This third unit in the overall argument of chapter two consists of one lengthy sentence in Greek that stresses God's initiative or role in the Thessalonians' salvation: the reason why Paul is obligated to give thanks for the Thessalonian believers is "because God *chose* you as firstfruits for salvation . . . for this purpose he *called* you . . . that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's argument here echoes exactly that which he used in the first letter. Just as the apostle comforted the Thessalonians there about their fate on the day of the Lord by affirming that "God has not destined us for wrath but for the obtaining of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:9), so here he again comforts his readers with

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[38] D. Hellholm, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," in A. Yarbro Collins, ed., *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting*, Semeia 36 (Decatur, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1986), 27.

[39] Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 41.

the assurance that God has "chosen" and "called" them "as firstfruits[40] for salvation." In the words of this article's title the salvation of the saints is sure.

The fate of the Thessalonians, therefore, will differ dramatically from that of their fellow citizens who are the cause of their persecutions and afflictions. As noted earlier in our examination of the passage's boundaries, Paul uses a couple of antithetical word pairs (truth/lie; destroyed/saved or salvation) in order to highlight the contrast between the unbelievers, described in the preceding verses, and the Thessalonian believers described here. Whereas unbelievers are said to "not receive the truth" (v. 10b), "to believe the lie" (v. 11a) and are "those who do not believe the truth" (v. 12), the Thessalonian Christians have been chosen by God through their "belief in the truth" (v. 13b). Whereas unbelievers are "those who are being destroyed" (v. 10a) and who do not accept the truth "in order that they may be saved" (v. 10b), the Thessalonian Christians are elected by God as firstfruits "for salvation" (v. 13b). These contrasts enhance the overall theme of comfort in two ways: first, the Thessalonians are comforted with respect to their apprehension about the day of the Lord, knowing their destiny is to experience salvation thanks to God's electing work; second, the Thessalonians are further comforted with respect to the persecution they endure at the hands of their unbelieving neighbors, knowing that their faith will one day be vindicated and their enemies will be justly punished.

D. The Command (v. 15)

After comforting the Thessalonians saints with their sure salvation, Paul begins to bring his argument to a close with a command: "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold fast the traditions which you were taught either by a word or by a letter from us." This call to mental *stability* here in verse 15 ("stand firm and hold fast") obviously looks back to the crisis of mental *instability* in verse 2, where Paul appeals to them to "not be shaken out of your mind or disturbed." The close connection between these two verses is also evident in the repetition of the prepositional (διά) phrases found in each: "whether by a word or by a letter from us" here in verse 15 clearly echoes "whether by a prophecy, by a word, or by a letter as from us" in verse 2.

This comparison between verse 15 and verse 2 serves to highlight not only their similarities but also significantly their differences, namely, the striking

[40] For a justification for following the reading ἀπαρχήν ("firstfruits") rather than ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ("from the beginning"), see the four grounds cited in B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Society, 1971), 636-37 and the helpful analysis in G. D. Fee, "On Text and Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *SBL 1992 Seminar Papers*, 179, which is repeated in his, *God's Empowering Presence*, 77, n. 142.

omission in verse 15 of the first of the three prepositional phrases found in verse 2: "by a prophecy."[41] That Paul has left out the first prepositional phrase suggests that this is where the source of the crisis lies. When the Thessalonian church has gathered together for worship, someone giving a prophecy has declared: "The day of the Lord has come." Consequently, Paul now commands them not to allow any *new* prophecies to go untested (1 Thess. 5:19-20) but to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions" which he *previously* taught them, either orally ("by a word") or in a written letter ("by a letter").

E. The Closing (vv. 16-17)

The fact that Paul closes his argument not with a command but with a prayer confirms the fact that the apostle's primary purpose in this passage is not didactic but pastoral, not to teach but to comfort. The Thessalonians ought to be comforted by the knowledge that Paul's prayer is directed to a God "who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope." God may be a God who carries out his justified wrath on the day of the Lord but the church need not fear this coming judgment, because this same God is one who loves them and gives them two things: (1) "eternal comfort," that is, a comfort not only in their present persecutions but also in their future judgment on the day of the Lord, and (2) "good hope," that is, a hope that, as in the first letter, is an eschatological hope, what Paul calls there "the hope of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:8; see also 1:3; 2:19; 4:13). The theme of comfort is even more sharply presented in the content of the prayer where Paul asks that God may "comfort your hearts and strengthen you in every good work and word."

IV. Conclusion

This Cliff's Notes version of the exegetical challenges of 2 Thessalonians 2 has resulted in a renewed appreciation for William Neil's characterization of this passage as "probably the most obscure and difficult passage in the whole of the Pauline correspondence." In fact, the difficulties of this passage are so great that we may have to settle for what Al Wolters refers to in another context as a "well-informed ignorance." In other words, we are ignorant in the sense that we cannot shout certain truths to our congregation but only whisper what Paul likely meant. Yet, our ignorance is at the same time well-informed in the sense that we have studied the problems of the text carefully and worked hard to

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[41] The phrase literally means "by a spirit," but in this context where it is set over against "a word" and "a letter" it likely has the sense of "charismatic utterance" (Giblin, *Threat to Faith*, 243; see also 149-50), "prophetic utterance" (G. Fee, "Pneuma and Eschatology in 2 Thessalonians 2.1-2: A Proposal about 'Testing the Prophets' and the Purpose of 2 Thessalonians," in *To Tell the Mystery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 207-8; also his *God's Empowering Presence*, 74) or "prophecy" (NIV; TNIV). In fact, there is a wide consensus among commentators that διὰ πνεύματος refers to some kind of prophetic utterance.

understand not only the differing answers to these problems but also the relative plausibility of these answers.

But while the meaning of many specific items in the text is difficult to determine, its overall function or purpose is not: to comfort God's people about the surety of their salvation on the day of the Lord. It this message of comfort that we ought to shout or sing to our congregations. The words of a beloved hymn express this comfort well:

> "O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
> the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
> the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend;
> even so, it is well with my soul."

Although we may not know and understand perfectly all the events that will take place on the day of the Lord, we do know and understand well the only thing that really matters: God has elected and called us as "firstfruits for salvation" and so whatever transpires on that eschatological day of judgment "it is well with our soul."