The Secret Power of Lawlessness

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Among the earliest extant writings of the Apostle Paul are two brief letters written to an infant church in the Macedonian Greek city of Thessalonica. While elements of Paul’s understanding of eschatological events and the coming of Christ may be found elsewhere in his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 15, Phil 2), the Thessalonian letters offer a unique contribution in describing future events in seeming detail. This includes the future resurrection of the dead (1 Thess 4–5) and the revealing of a future figure of power and lawlessness (2 Thess 2).

Historical and Literary Context
In seeking to understand the eschatological perspective and teachings of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, it is prudent to recover as much historical background as possible, for these letters were written to address questions and needs of their time and place. As C. K. Barrett has written, “The linkage between theological and historical issues is characteristic of the New Testament as a whole.” Our twenty-first-century perspectives and needs for eschatological insights are very different from those of the mid-first-century Thessalonian community. This means these letters may give us theological information that lacks immediate application for our situations, and at the same time leave questions that seem important to us unanswered.

The book of Acts is our sole non-Pauline source for understanding the probable historical circumstances that gave occasion for 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Although the precise historicity of Acts has been questioned, Acts 17.1–10 relates Paul’s Thessalonian episode in some detail and gives no reason to question its reliability. In some ways, Paul’s evangelistic efforts and results in Thessalonica present the usual pattern of his experiences in the Greek cities in an archetypical way.

We are told that shortly after arriving in Thessalonica Paul visits the synagogue. This is more than simply his methodology for a new city. It is his custom (kata ... to eiōthos tō Paulō) as a Jew to participate with a local synagogue on the Sabbath (cf. Luke 4.16). He quickly moves to present the gospel in this Jewish context by using Scriptures to prove (dialegomai) three things central to his message. First, the Messiah prophesied in Jewish Scriptures must suffer (paschō), meaning he must die (Jesus’s crucifixion). Second, this Messiah must be resurrected (anistēmi) from the dead (ek nekrōn). Third, the one who meets these prophetic qualifications is Jesus, the one whom Paul proclaims (kataggellō). Although Paul is teaching nearly twenty years after the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Acts presents these as new claims for the Thessalonian synagogue.

1 There is endless debate about both the dating and authenticity of the letters of the Pauline corpus and this essay offers no contribution to this discussion. The Thessalonian letters included in the canon of the New Testament (who is to say there were not others?) are generally recognized as the earliest surviving writings of Paul with the possible exception of Galatians. This author believes Galatians to have been written shortly after the Jerusalem Conference of AD 49, but the lack of eschatological perspective in that letter makes it immaterial for the present study.


3 Like the dating and authenticity of the Pauline letters, the historicity of Acts has also found many differing voices.
to consider: the Messiah anticipated in Jewish Scripture was executed, resurrected, and is identified as Jesus, a teacher from Galilee.

Acts tells us that the message is well received by three carefully delineated groups: some of the synagogue men, a larger number of godly Greek men (τῶν ἰσπυριμένων ἡλένων), and a substantial number of first-rank (τῶν πρώτων) women. Any numbers we would assign to these converts are guesses, but this description does give the impression that the synagogue of the Thessalonians was substantial, having sway among Gentile God-fearers and influential city women. The description of the God-fearing converts uses the word often translated “multitude” (πλῆθος) giving the impression of hundreds rather than dozens involved in this budding church.

Acts’ Thessalonian episode ends on a note of conflict. Some of the unconvinced Jews become violent in their opposition to Paul and Silas and resort to mob action. They gather ruffians from the marketplace and rush in riotous fashion to the home of Jason, the place where Paul and Silas were known to be lodging. Not finding the evangelists there, they take Jason himself and some others to the city authorities. Acts describes this as “dragging” (σαρω), a word that implies rough, involuntary physical coercion.4 Jason and his comrades are charged with harboring Paul and Silas, who are characterized as threats to the civic order of Thessalonica. Specifically, their teaching is said to be opposing the decrees of the Caesar (τῶν δογμάτων Καισαρὸς) and claiming there was a rival king to the emperor (Jesus). These are allegations of treason and the authorities are justifiably troubled. Jason and the others are released on bail and we are left to presume the authorities intend to find Paul and Silas and put a stop to this treasonous talk.

This danger to the liberty and even lives of Paul and Silas is so serious that their friends in Thessalonica arrange for them to leave the city that night and proceed to Berea, about 45 miles (70 k) west and south. In the narrative of Acts, Berea is presented as a great contrast to chaotic Thessalonica, for there the synagogue members soberly examine Paul’s scriptural claims and respond favorably to his message (Acts 17.11–12). However, Paul’s opponents from Thessalonica eventually pursue him to Berea with the result that he must flee all the way to Athens for safety. He leaves behind Silas and Timothy (apparently not targets of the Thessalonian Jews), who serve as messengers between Paul and the Thessalonian Christians after his departure from the region.

What are we to take from the Acts description of Paul’s time in Thessalonica? First, the visit is brief, no more than a month, for Paul is able to engage the synagogue only three Sabbath-day meetings (Acts 17.2). We are wrong, however, to equate this to three Sunday sermons of thirty minutes as would be the case in our modern churches. It is likely that Paul and Silas are debating and teaching daily throughout this period. Their claims were so astounding that the large crowds claimed by Acts would have been available to them for many hours each day, perhaps a couple hundred hours total.

Second, the charges against Paul and Silas to the Roman authorities are curious at first glance. Acts includes only details that serve its narrative purpose, but why would it project a charge of challenging the emperor’s authority? It seems that there must be an accurate remembrance of this occasion for such a serious charge to be leveled in the narrative. Jesus would pose no threat as a rival king if he were dead, no matter what his status with regard to Jewish Scriptures. Likewise, he would pose no threat if he were somehow resurrected but now safely removed to heaven. Only if he were expected to reappear and, perhaps, lead a rebellion would his threat to Roman authority seem credible. Acts, then, may contain a helpful reflection of Paul’s teaching in his month-long instructional stay: he left his new congregation with a strong expectation of Jesus’s imminent return.

The Resurrection of the Dead (1 Thess 4.13–5.11)

1 Thessalonians 4.13ff. contains a remarkable description of Paul’s understanding of the resurrection of the dead and the return of Christ. This is stylized as an answer to concerns among the Thessalonians, either through a written communication or by way of Timothy.5 The gist of the problem is a practical concern: what is

4. This is a word Acts uses to describe Saul/Paul’s violent removal of Christians from their houses (Acts 8.3) and of the unconscious Paul being dragged out of Lystra after being stoned (Acts 14.19).

the future for those among the Thessalonian believers who die before Christ’s return? Would their deaths disallow their participation in the glorious event?

While the nature of human death and resurrection underlies this concern, it is not the primary worry. Paul’s answer is limited to those who have died “in him [Jesus]” (4.14); who are “the dead in Christ [hoi nekroi en Christō]” (4.16). Paul does not address here the fate of those who have died without Christ (although they may be included among “the rest who have no hope [hoi loipoi hoi mē echontes elpida],” 4.13). If the Thessalonians had been particularly energized by the hope of Christ’s return, even thereby suffering the wrath of Jewish unbelievers and the disdain of the Roman authorities, the idea that some of their number might miss the great day because of premature death was troubling.

Paul puts to rest the fears of the Thessalonians by rehearsing the highlights of Christ’s return and including a resurrection of these deceased saints. While this explanation might be new teaching to the Macedonian believers, the framework for Paul’s description of the return is surely familiar to them. Indeed, Paul seems to fall into a dramatic cadence portraying the sequencing of the return events. In so doing, he establishes a foundational tenet of Christian eschatology: that the return of Christ and the resurrection of dead believers will be part of the same event.

We should not forget the purpose of this teaching is to answer the questions about the dead believers from Thessalonica, yet it is appropriate to notice other eschatological teachings that are part of this answer. We may discern four primary points in this regard. First, any hope for the resurrection of these dead Christians is based on the resurrection of Christ himself (4.14, cf. 1 Cor 15.12–19), a keystone of Paul’s teaching in Thessalonica according to Acts. The past resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of Christians are inseparable doctrines for Paul.

Second, the gathering of believers by the Christ will begin with the newly resurrected saints, but also include the living believers (4.17). One cannot help but notice that Paul expects to be in the second group rather than the first. This reflects both the assumption that the return was near and the stark reality that Paul claimed no revelation as to the exact date for the Parousia. Indeed, Paul goes on to emphasize the unexpected nature of the return, likening it to a “thief in the night” (5.2), traditional language that may be traced to Jesus himself (see Matt 24.43, cf. 2 Pet 3.10; Rev 3.3, 16.15).

Third, the return of Christ will be spectacular and public. It will begin with a command (keleusma) from Christ himself followed by a summons (phōnē) from an archangel and the sounding of the trumpet of God. All of these are supernatural yet physical phenomena and will presumably be heard by all those living on the earth. Even more, these mighty noises will literally wake the dead, for it is at this time they will rise (4.16). This gives a certain martial air to the proceedings, like a general mustering his troops for battle.

Christ will reveal himself by descending from heaven and the gathering of the dead and living saints will be in the air, indicating a suspension of natural laws. From the cosmological viewpoint of ancient peoples, if Christ were high enough in the sky, every person on earth would be able to see him (cf. Rev 1.7). This image of sky-gathering is the basis for the doctrine of the rapture, which is expanded by its adherents to include both those who are taken and those who are left behind.6 Paul’s description of events leaves us with the reunion of believers and their Lord in the air, going no further than promising a future with the Lord always (pantote sun kurio, 4.17).

In 2 Thessalonians 1.6–10, Paul has more to say about this revealing of Christ. In this later passage, Paul portrays Christ as coming as a blazing fire accompanied by an army of angels (2 Thess 1.7–8). Here, Paul includes words of judgment for disobedient unbelievers who will suffer the vengeance of the returned Christ. While there is no judgment scene, this vengeance will lead to “eternal destruction” for the unbelievers, explained as separation from Christ and his glory (2 Thess 1.9).

6. See N.T. Wright, “Farewell to the Rapture,” BR 17.4 (August 2001): 8, 52. While 1 Thess 4 is an essential component to many premillennial scenarios of the end times, it should be noted that there is no place in Paul’s description of the Parousia here that supports the supposition of the rapture with its ideas of two resurrections. See Gerhard Vos, The Pauline Eschatology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994 [originally published 1930]), 246–53.
The fourth eschatological teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4.13ff. is that while this future is certain for Paul, the timing is not. Therefore, he proceeds to redirect the original question into an opportunity to exhort the Thessalonians to be ready for the return. The Thessalonians must remain watchful (γρηγορεῖ) and sober (νήφῃ, 5.6) but not out of fear. For Paul, these promises are of great comfort and should cause the believers to be hopeful even in the midst of their current tribulations (see 2 Thess 1.5). Their watchfulness and sobriety is to be in anticipation of the joy of the return, not to be based on worry about their status with the returning Christ (cf. Mark 13.37).

**The Coming Lawless One (2 Thess 2.1–12)**

In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul addresses a desire of the Thessalonians to have more information about the timing of Christ’s return. This is necessitated by a false teaching that has infiltrated the Thessalonian congregation, perhaps under the guise of a forged letter attributed to Paul (2.2). In this case, the worry is not that those who die will miss the return of Christ, but that Christ’s Parousia has come and gone and they all missed it. In this, Paul discusses a great eschatological figure who stands in contrast and opposition to the Christ, and whose ascendancy must come before the return. By teaching about this coming evil one, Paul intends to reassure the Thessalonians that the return is yet to come, but his description of this figure has been seen as a treasure trove of information for those who want a systematic presentation of all things eschatological based on scattered biblical teachings.

Not all of this is new teaching, for Paul chides the Thessalonians that he has taught some of this during his month in their city (2.5). Therefore, we should not see the teaching about this evil eschatological figure as a surprise to the readers, but as something of review, clarification, and expansion.

Paul refers to this figure as “the man of lawlessness” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, 2.3) although the language here is not gender-specific. Similarly, Paul calls this person “the lawless one” (ὁ ἁμαρτιῶν, 2.8, 9). We should not see these as titles, but as a descriptions of one who engages in behavior that is rebelliously disobedient to God’s laws. Paul also calls this person “the son of destruction” (ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπολλωσίας), again not necessarily gender-specific terminology. This does not mean “the one who causes destruction” as much as “the one who will be destroyed” (cf. 1 Thess 5.9).

Paul’s account of the coming of the eschatological lawless one contrasts dramatically to the coming of Christ. This is seen in three ways. First, Paul’s language repeatedly refers to the “revelation” (ἀποκάλυψις) of the lawless one (2.3, 6, 8). This is prime eschatological language, indicating a future, preordained event (cf. 1 Pet 1.5). Christ is not the only one whose coming should be anticipated. According to the plan of God, this lawless one plays a key role in the end times events. God is not merely an observer in these comings. Paul indicates God’s participation by saying that God would send a “powerful error” (ἐνεργείαν πλενῆ) to unbelievers, leading to them believing a lie (2.11). Why, exactly, God would do this is unexplained, but their disobedience and unbelief is the justification for their coming condemnation (2.12). The coming lawless one will lead those “who are perishing” (τοῖς ἀπολλυόμενοις, 2.10) much as Christ will gather his believers when he is revealed. Christ leads his followers to glory, but the lawless one leads his adherents to destruction.

Second, the lawless one will instigate an uprising (ἀποστασία = “apostasy,” 2.3), a rebellion against God himself. Paul portrays this with startling images. The lawless one will scorn all existing forms of religion and repudiate all gods by declaring himself to be God. This includes enthroning himself in the “temple of God,” perhaps the Jerusalem temple (2.4). Some modern students of prophecy find this reference to require a rebuilding of this temple in Jerusalem before the eschatological events can begin. This goes beyond Paul’s

7. Some old manuscripts read “man of sin” (ἁμαρτιῶν), a reading followed in the KJV.
intent, however, for he is describing events he believes he and his Thessalonians may witness in their lifetimes, not providing fodder for modern eschatological speculation. Paul further describes the lawless one as a wonder-worker, fueled by the power of Satan (2.9). This contributes to the success of his apostasy/rebellion, for he finds many who are eager to believe his lies. For Paul, these are people who reject the truth and therefore refuse to be saved (2.10).

Third, despite the terrifying description of the coming lawless one, Paul assures his readers that the revealed Christ will destroy him. This seems to be a sequenced future: the lawless one is revealed and initiates his rebellion against God, then Christ is revealed and the lawless one’s run is ended. This is done by the “breath of Christ’s mouth” (2.8) at the time of Christ’s appearance. The coming of Christ will be more than a gathering of his saints. It will be a vindication of his truth and a destruction of his lying opponents. We cannot help but think that the Thessalonians readers are thus assured that the power of evil (which they were experiencing in some ways) is temporary, and the victory of Christ is eternal.

**Preaching about the Secret Power of Lawlessness**

How do we preach the eschatological teachings of 1 and 2 Thessalonians today? Some are content to preach details of their systematic prophecy constructs, feeding the fascination of a few in their congregations. These theories include modern identifications of the lawless one as the antichrist of the Johannine Epistles or the beast of Revelation 13 and 17 by seeking to weave all of these difficult texts into a neat package. Speculation thus equates the lawless one to various popes, presidents, or other world leaders. Other preachers tie these passages to the modern state of Israel, which is seen as a fulfillment of prophecy and a key to setting the eschaton in motion. Still others use these passages to construct elaborate theories of a rapture of the saints, annihilationism, or predestination for salvation.

None of these things were in Paul’s intent when he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. He was seeking to correct and encourage a group of new Christians with few resources to help them remain orthodox in their beliefs. They may not have been the diligent students of Scriptures that their neighbors in Berea were, but they seemed to devour and treasure the teachings of their beloved Paul, the one who had brought them the saving power of the gospel.

In 2 Thessalonians 2.7, Paul teaches his readers that “the secret power of lawlessness is already at work” (NIV2011) For Paul, everything he wrote about was either in the present or in the near future. This secret power of lawlessness was only secret if unrecognized. It still is. Rebellion and apostasy have attacked the church relentlessly since Paul’s day until now and must be exposed. Paul held out the hope of Christ’s return, but this was not his only message. The secret power of lawlessness can only be countered by the public proclamation of truth. The power of Satan’s agents, whether in Paul’s time or ours, is destroyed by the spirit of Christ’s mouth, his words of grace and truth.

It is right for us to look forward to the coming of our Lord Jesus—to pray, “Maranatha” (1 Cor 16.22, Rev 22.20). But we must look forward to his return with joyful anticipation, not fear or dread. Are we to fear the coming lawless one and the havoc he might wreak on the church? Maybe, but Paul’s message is not designed to engender such fear. It is to encourage and comfort, to rest in the assurance that the risen and living Christ has not forgotten us, and that whether we are in our homes or our graves, he will come and take us to be with him forever.

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