

IDENTIFYING THE RESTRAINER

“LET NO ONE IN ANY WAY DECEIVE YOU, FOR IT WILL NOT COME UNLESS THE APOSTASY COMES FIRST, AND THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS IS REVEALED, THE SON OF DESTRUCTION, WHO OPPOSES AND EXALTS HIMSELF ABOVE EVERY SO-CALLED GOD OR OBJECT OF WORSHIP, SO THAT HE TAKES HIS SEAT IN THE TEMPLE OF GOD, DISPLAYING HIMSELF AS BEING GOD. DO YOU NOT REMEMBER THAT WHILE I WAS STILL WITH YOU, I WAS TELLING YOU THESE THINGS? AND YOU KNOW WHAT RESTRAINS HIM NOW, SO THAT IN HIS TIME HE WILL BE REVEALED. 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. THEN THAT LAWLESS ONE WILL BE REVEALED WHOM THE LORD WILL SLAY WITH THE BREATH OF HIS MOUTH AND BRING TO AN END BY THE APPEARANCE OF HIS COMING” - 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-8

I. 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-8

- A. “it” = the second coming of Jesus Christ
- B. “man of lawlessness” is the antichrist
- C. “is revealed” Greek word is apokalupsis; the same word is used for the revealing of Jesus Christ
 - 1) this refers to a very specific incident that will take place in the middle of the 7 years, but it doesn’t mean we won’t be able to identify the antichrist before that
- D. “while I was still with you, I was telling you these things”
 - 1) we don’t have an oral tradition of what Paul said, so it leaves us guessing, to some degree, what he was discussing
- E. “whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth”
 - 1) Isaiah 11:4

II. THE CHALLENGE

- A. The challenge is the fact that Paul is referring to something which he taught the Thessalonians that we don’t have record of. Regardless of one’s position on the Rapture, this is a challenge that all Christians face.
- B. “These two verses (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7) are among the most problematic texts in the whole of the Pauline corpus. They presuppose knowledge to which we do not have access. No fully convincing parallels have ever been suggested, and, beyond the likelihood that the material

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derives from the mythical world of apocalypticism, no one has put forward a satisfactory background for the verses.” - Charles A. Wanamaker, New International Greek Testament Commentary

- C. “The bottom line here, on this particular point, is that there is so much difficulty in identifying this restrainer—there are twelve to fifteen different views—that we can’t really build anything on it.” - Darrell L. Bock

III. INTERPRETATIONS OF THE RESTRAINER

- A. Human Government
 - 1) one of the most common interpretations in the Early Church was that the Roman Empire was the restrainer
 - 2) some look at modern law and government in the same light
- B. The Grace of the Holy Spirit
 - 1) pretribbers generally say that when the church is raptured, the Holy Spirit Himself will be removed from the earth
- C. Paul the Apostle
 - 1) some speculate that Paul believed he himself was the restrainer; that, as the apostle to the Gentiles, once he and his ministry were removed, the antichrist would be revealed
- D. The Will of God
 - 1) ties in with the grace of the Holy Spirit
- E. A Principality or Angelic Being
 - 1) many specifically believe it to be Michael the archangel
- F. Satan
 - 1) once he’s cast out of heaven by Michael, that’s when he is enraged because he knows his time is short

IV. INTERPRETATIONS OF THE EARLY CHURCH // HUMAN GOVERNMENT

- A. We must recognize that the Holy Spirit speaks to us not only personally but also to His Church. Before we exalt our personal opinions, it is good to look at the majority opinions of the Early Church and throughout history.
- B. Human Government
 - 1) “There is also another, even greater, obligation for us to pray for the emperors; yes, even for the continuance of the empire in general and for interests. We realize that the tremendous force which is hanging over the whole world, and the very end of the world with its threat of dreadful afflictions, is arrested for a time by the continued existence of the Roman Empire. This event we have no desire to experience and, in praying that it may be



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deferred, we favor the continuance of Rome.” - Tertullian, Apology 32.29

- 2) “What obstacle is there but the Roman state, the falling away of which, by being scattered into ten kingdoms, shall introduce Antichrist upon (its own ruins)?” - Tertullian, “On the Resurrection of the Flesh” (24)
- 3) “What then is it that withholdeth, that is, hindereth him from being revealed? Some indeed say, the grace of the Spirit, but others the Roman empire, to whom I most of all accede. Wherefore? Because if he meant to say the Spirit, he would not have spoken obscurely, but plainly... But because he said this of the Roman empire, he naturally glanced at it, and speaks covertly and darkly. For he did not wish to bring upon himself superfluous enmities, and useless dangers... And he has well said, “the mystery”; that is, it worketh not openly... So indeed he also says here. “Only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way,” that is, the Roman empire is taken out of the way, then he shall come. And naturally. For as long as the fear of this empire lasts, no one will willingly exalt himself, but when that is dissolved, he will attack the anarchy, and endeavor to seize upon the government both of man and of God.” - John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians”

C. The Will of God

- 1) “Indeed, the God of the universe has decreed that this figure shall himself appear during the time of consummation, and thus it is God’s own decree that actually detains him until that appearance.” - Theodoret of Cyr, 2 Thessalonians

D. Grammatical Considerations

- 1) there are two references to the “restrainer”: one is neuter and the other uses the personal pronoun “he.”

6And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be
 kai oidate to katechon nyn eis en heautou tō kairō auton
 revealed .
 to apokalyphthēnai

7For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do
 gar to mystērion tēs anomias ēdē energeitai monon ho arti katechōn
 so until he is taken out of the way.
 heōs genētai ek mesou



V. THE HOLY SPIRIT

A. The Holy Spirit's Work in the Church

- 1) "A number of people have suggested the restrainer might be the Holy Spirit indwelling the church. And in this view, we would have perhaps a reference to the rapture; it's only when the church is taken out of the world with the Spirit's work in the church that the ultimate evil will be unleashed. And this could imply obviously a pre or midtribulational rapture. As the church is taken out of the world, its positive influence through the Spirit is removed, and at that point, the terrible events of the tribulation unfold. That, however, is an unusual interpretation of the language of "restrainer." If Paul meant the Spirit, why didn't he say "Spirit"? Furthermore, even if he means the Spirit, there is nothing in the context to suggest it's the Holy Spirit only as indwelling the church." - Darrell L. Bock, *Perspectives on Eschatology: Five Views on the Millennium*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017)

VI. ANGELIC FIGURE OR PRINCIPALITY

A. Michael the Archangel

- 1) "Other people think it might refer to some angelic figures, such as, for instance, the archangel Michael, who seems to have this role elsewhere, going back to the book of Daniel, for instance—the view that I might slightly prefer." - Darrell L. Bock, *Perspectives on Eschatology: Five Views on the Millennium*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017)
- 2) "Daniel 12:1-2 tells us that before the final resurrection at the eschaton the archangel Michael will arise. Michael is called "the great prince who protects your people." He will arise because there will be a time of unparalleled great distress. In widely diverse early Jewish and Jewish Christian literature Michael is seen as the most important archangel (1 Enoch 24.6; Testament of Isaac 2.1; Ascension of Isaiah 3:15-16; 1QM 17.7; 3 Enoch 17.3)." - Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*
- 3) there is pretty solid Old Testament and intertestamental support

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for the view that Paul was talking about Michael the archangel

VII. SATAN

- A. Whether the restrainer is intended by Paul to be Satan or Michael the archangel, the event (the final 3 ½ year period) is the same.
- 1) Revelation 12:7-12
 - a) “our brethren” the saints alive on the earth during the Tribulation
 - b) “a short time” refers to the 3 ½ years of the Tribulation
 - 2) Daniel 10:13-14
 - a) “withstanding” the equivalent Greek word is used for “restraining”
 - b) “in the last days Michael will rise up” just before the resurrection, in the context of the last days
 - c) Jesus sealed Satan’s fate on the cross, but presently Satan roams about the earth like a “roaring lion” and still has access to God’s throne to accuse us
- B. In my opinion, Paul was talking about this time when Michael will rise up and kick Satan out of heaven.
- 1) Deuteronomy 32
- C. The apostacy and revealing of the antichrist is what is holding back the Day of the Lord, the return of Jesus, and the gathering together of the saints. The revealing of the antichrist is when the world sees that he’s not just a man, but he is a satanically-possessed, demonically-empowered individual - essentially the manifestation of Satan. It will be through the heavenly warfare of Michael and his angels that the accuser of our brethren will be cast out of heaven and down to the earth.