

THE RESTRAINER

2 THESSALONIANS 2:1–12



For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work....

Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way” (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

2 Thessalonians 2:1–12

As we noted yesterday, issues concerning eschatology (the study of last things) continue to be hotly debated in the church. One of the reasons for this is our uncertainty regarding some of the contexts surrounding the writings of the apostle Paul.

Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in today’s passage in which Paul speaks of events that must precede the return of Jesus. This passage raises many questions, but we will spend time today discussing the identity of the restrainer the apostle mentions. Paul tells us that Jesus will not return until the man of lawlessness is first revealed (v. 3), and this man of lawlessness cannot be revealed until “he who now restrains” him is taken away (vv. 7–8).

Our limited knowledge about the original situation faced by Paul’s audience makes this passage difficult. For it is fairly clear that this audience knew exactly to whom Paul was referring when he mentioned the restrainer. While the text does tell us that the original audience was having questions about the return of Christ, it does not identify who the restrainer is.

Thus, we should be careful about being dogmatic about who the restrainer is. Some enthusiastically identify the restrainer as the Holy Spirit and have said that this passage teaches a pretribulational rapture of the church. As the thinking goes, since the Holy Spirit indwells the church, if the Holy Spirit is removed, so then must the church that He indwells be gone from the earth.

Though this interpretation is not impossible, the difficulties with the rapture theory mentioned in yesterday’s study make it unlikely. Even if the Holy Spirit is the restrainer, all Paul would have to be saying in this passage is that He is ceasing His work of restraining evil, not that He is necessarily gone from the earth.

Whoever the restrainer may be, we must always remember that it is God who ultimately determines when the restrainer is removed. It is by His hand that all things come to pass (Ephesians 1:11), and because of His goodness we can trust Him to preserve His own people forever, no matter how His sovereign will is worked out (John 6:39).¹

CORAM DEO

Knowing the identity of the restrainer mentioned in today's passage would indeed be a good thing for our understanding of this text. However, whether or not we are ever clear of the identity of this restrainer, the important point of today's passage is that we see God's sovereign control of the return of Christ. For it is God who ordains these signs and who ordains the time of Jesus' return. Let your trust in His sovereignty sustain you as you hope for the return of our Lord.¹

OPEN IT

1. As a child did you have a particular fear? What was it? How did you conquer the fear?

2. What two things does Paul do when it comes to the Thessalonians in verses 3 and 4?

EXPLORE IT

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

3. What two reasons does Paul give for writing his friends in verses 1-2?

4. What must come before the man of lawlessness is revealed?

5. What will the man of lawlessness do, according to verse 4?

6. Who is the power behind the man of lawlessness?

¹Devotional by Ligonier Ministries found @ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/restrainer-1302/>

7. What keeps people from seeing the truth?



GET IT

Verses 1–2 tell us what the problem is and what Paul is trying to accomplish:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

So Paul's aim here is, first, that the Thessalonians not be shaken from their senses (v. 2), that they keep their heads, we might say, that they not be thrown off balance or lose their equilibrium. He wants to help them be calm and composed and steady and clear-thinking in all the upheaval around them.

Second, his aim is that they not be "excited" in the sense of being disturbed or alarmed (v. 2). The word is used in Mark 13:7, for example, in the same kind of context: Jesus says, "And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet."

So Paul's aim is very practical in this passage: he wants to help Christians experience peace and calm and stability and clarity of mind—Christians who don't get all "shook up" and agitated and anxious and fretful and confused and off-balance when crises come to the world.²

8. Bedrock to the Christian faith is the belief and confidence that God is in control of human history. Why then do so many Christians get so worked up over the events surrounding end times?

9. Why would Paul want to keep the Thessalonians from being shaken and alarmed? What happens to believers who become alarmed and shaken from their senses?

Rebellion: *The apostasy, (gk. apostasia) short definition to revolt, rebellion.... A long definition: A deliberate abandonment of a formerly professed religious position. In other words, you're associated with a certain religious view, you profess it and then you revolt against it. That's apostasy. Revolting, rebelling against a position you once professed. This is defection, religious defection.³*

10. What might cause people to so quickly and forcefully rebel against that which they once held dear?

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-must-happen-before-the-day-of-the-lord>

³ <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/53-9>

11. If God promises to keep all true believers safe in His salvation to the very end, then who are these people who are falling away from the faith? In what ways does this passage challenge your faith? How does it comfort you?

12. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3–4. What are some of the characteristics or activities that can bring assurance that one's faith is sound and ready to stand firm against any temptation to fall away from the faith?

Pastor John Piper gives us three characteristics of the "man of lawlessness":

- 1. First, from verse 3, simply notice his name, the "man of lawlessness." We may infer from this that he is an individual person and that he embodies the spirit of rebellion against God's law—lawlessness.*
- 2. Second, from the end of verse 3, notice that he is a "son of perdition": just as surely as his character is lawless, his destiny is destruction. Perdition clings to his very nature. Let us hear in this an earnest warning to guard ourselves from rebellion against God's law, because it leads to perdition (cf. 1:9).*
- 3. Third, from verse 4, the man of lawlessness will oppose God and all objects of worship except himself. He will exalt himself, Paul says, and put himself forward as God. And as a means to that end it says he takes his seat in the temple of God, which may mean the church, since Paul calls the church the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21)—that is, he may become some kind of world-church leader. Or the temple here may refer to the temple in Jerusalem.*

13. As one observes history, evil leaders are men who garner a great number of followers during their ascent to power. What causes people to be so gullible as to follow such evil men?

The Antichrist's miracles will reveal his supernatural power and create wonder, shock, and astonishment. Pseudos (false) modifies all three terms; Antichrist's miracles, signs, and wonders are false not in the sense that they are fakery but that they lead to false conclusions about who he is. They will cause people to believe the lie that he is a divine being and worship him.⁴

14. What might cause people to worship this man as God? What type of signs and wonders would it take for your unbelieving friends or family to affirm deity to such a man?

⁴ Paul Apple Commentary found @ <http://bibleoutlines.com/library/pdf/2thessalonians.pdf>

"Paul goes on to say there is a mystery of evil at work in our world. He calls it 'the mystery of lawlessness' which is already at work. It is the strange secret of universal evil. Even secular prophets are puzzled by it. What is it about our race that makes it so difficult to correct the conditions that destroy it? Why is drug trafficking so impossible to stop when it is clearly evident what terrible things it does to people? Why is it that alcoholics will return again and again to their habit when they see that it is destroying their homes and families, and even their own lives? It is a mystery; the mystery of lawlessness; the strange secret of human evil. Why is it that as the centuries go by we have made zero progress in curing human wickedness? We are still wrestling with the problem just as people wrestled with it five thousand years before Christ. We do not make any progress in this area."⁵

15. How do you see the mystery of lawlessness alive and well today? How do we help those who have bought into the lies to see the truth?

Commentators have considered three possibilities for the identity of this "restrainer": (1) government and law, which help to curb evil; (2) the ministry and activity of the church and the effects of the gospel; (3) the Holy Spirit.

The clearest and most plausible of views is #1.

John Stott articulates this position well by stating: "if it not for some remaining restraints (which preserve a measure of justice, freedom, order and decency) these things would break out much more virulently. And one day they will. For when the restraint is removed, then secret subversion will become open rebellion under the unscrupulous leadership of the lawless one who will be revealed (8a). Then we can expect a period (mercifully short) of political, social and moral chaos, in which both God and Law are impudently flouted, until suddenly the Lord Jesus will come and overthrow him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by the splendor of his come."⁶

16. How might a leader of great charisma and leadership thrive in a time and place where anarchy is alive and well?

17. How will Jesus deal with this leader? What does this say about the true Christ we worship and serve?

18. Why should verse 8 cause the Christian to be encouraged and filled with praise?

⁵ Stedman, Ray. Peninsula Bible Church, Mountain View, CA. Website: <http://www.pbc.org>

⁶ Stott, John R. W. The Bible Speaks Today -- The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991.

Paul's answer at the end of verse 10 is that they refuse to love the truth (literally: they did not welcome a love for the truth). Notice: it is not merely an issue of knowing or believing in a merely mental sense; it is an issue of loving.

Look at verse 12: ". . . so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." The opposite of believing the truth is delighting in evil.

And this means that saving faith—faith that will endure to the end through the affliction now and through the apostasy to come—is not merely an accepting of truth but a loving of truth. Verse 10: "They perish because they refused to love the truth."

We can be sure that when the man of lawlessness comes, his signs and wonders will be used to support claims that appeal to our natural desires. Therefore, the only defense against this appeal will be a deeper desire for God. If Christ is our portion and our treasure, if he satisfies our longings, and if we love the glory of his gospel, then the mystery of lawlessness will not overcome us, and our love will not grow cold and we will endure to the end and be saved. May the Lord grant us all to receive the love of the truth. Amen.⁷

19. Our text speaks of a time when Christians will endure a time of great chaos and calamity and yet they will be times when Paul says, in chapter one, our faith will flourish and grow. How can both of these truths be true at the same time?

20. Paul distinguishes between true and false believers as those who love the truth and those who don't love the truth. In what practical ways can you show greater love for the truth?

⁷ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-must-happen-before-the-day-of-the-lord>