

Who Is The Restrainer?

Prophecy is an interesting field. Despite the fact that the Bible spends a significant portion of its text talking about end-times events, for the most part the modern Church sees prophecy as a distraction. Yes, there are pockets of people here and there who take the subject seriously, but they are the exception. The prevailing attitude seems to be “Well, Jesus hasn't returned yet and He probably won't return in my lifetime, so there's no sense in thinking about it.” Jesus' command to “Watch!” is largely ignored, and churches that teach prophecy are rare.

The early church, however, was different. They had all sorts of questions regarding the Second Coming, and Paul spent quite a lot of time addressing their concerns and clearing up their misconceptions. One such passage can be found in his second letter to the Thessalonians, which contains a verse that I would like to explore. First, though, here is the passage:

2 Thessalonians 2:1: “Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him,
2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.
3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;
4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.
5 Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?
6 And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.
7 For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.
8 And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:
9 Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,
10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.”

There's a lot going on in these verses, and unfortunately the King James translation makes the verse I want to discuss very difficult to understand. But we'll get to that in a minute.

In these verses Paul is addressing some people in the Thessalonian church who were worried that they had missed the Rapture. Someone (we don't know who) was telling them that the Tribulation had already begun. Paul replied that these teachers were in error, and there were actually several key events that had to take place before the Tribulation could begin.

The first point Paul makes is that before the Tribulation can begin there must be a great apostasy:

2 Thessalonians 2:3: “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;”

The phrase “falling away” in verse 3 is actually the Greek word *apostasia*, which is where we

get the word apostasy. The “man of sin” is a reference to the antichrist. In other words, before the Tribulation period can start there must be a great apostasy and the antichrist must be revealed. Paul then explains that the reason the antichrist has not yet appeared is because someone is restraining him, and this restraining force must be taken out of the way before he can rise to power. We can see that in verse 6:

2 Thessalonians 2:6: “And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.

7 For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.”

The phrase “letteth will let” is the Greek word *katecho*, which means “to restrain, hinder.” The ASV translation of this passage is much easier to understand:

2 Thessalonians 2:6: “And now ye know that which restraineth, to the end that he may be revealed in his own season.

7 For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work: only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way.”

What this passage means is that someone is actively keeping the antichrist from appearing. The antichrist will not appear until this restraining influence has been taken out of the way. Only after that happens will he be free to rise to power.

This brings up an important question: just who is this restrainer? Traditionally scholars have taught that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, and that He is the one who is actively keeping the antichrist from appearing. This seems plausible, but if you go back and read the verses you'll notice that the passage never mentions the Holy Spirit. In fact, none of the verses identify the restrainer or offer any hints as to who it might be! This means that if we want to determine his identity we'll have to go about it in a slightly different way.

Based on what we know about the Holy Spirit, is it possible or likely that He is the restrainer? Well, in order to answer that we'll need to know what work the Holy Spirit performs. Are there good, Biblical reasons for thinking that He is an ideal candidate for this role?

As it turns out, the Bible actually tells us quite a lot about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. For example, He teaches us:

John 14:26: “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”

He leads us:

Romans 8:14: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.”

He intercedes for us:

Romans 8:26: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”

He gives specific council and guidance in situations:

Acts 8:29: "Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot."

He reveals things to mankind, and knows the deep things of God:

1 Corinthians 2:10: "But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.

11 For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God."

He sanctifies:

2 Thessalonians 2:13: "But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth:"

Titus 3:5: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;"

He rebukes the world:

John 16:7: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.

8 And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:"

There are also the gifts of the Spirit, which is another conversation entirely. However, notice that in this entire list there is one thing missing: there is no record of the Holy Spirit restraining evil! There are many amazing and wonderful things that the Holy Spirit does, but that activity is simply not mentioned. Now, it may be that the Spirit *does* restrain evil and God just hasn't told us, but that is a very weak argument. When looking at what the Bible actually has to say about the Holy Spirit I simply don't see anything that would support the idea that He is restraining the antichrist. That doesn't seem to fit into His ministry.

However, there is another candidate. As it turns out, there *is* a group that is actively involved in restraining evil and battling the forces of darkness. That group is known as the angels, and they are led by Michael the archangel.

First, the Bible tells us that angels watch over believers and protect them:

Psalms 91:9: "Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation;

10 There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

11 For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways."

Second, Daniel records a time when demonic forces attempted to keep an angel from visiting

Daniel and answering his prayer. The demons were forced to retreat when Michael came and provided additional support:

Daniel 10:12: "Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words.

13 But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia."

The demons were successful in keeping the angel at bay, but when Michael came they were forced to yield. This should come as no surprise, as the Bible describes Michael as a tremendously powerful being who is highly effective in resisting the powers of darkness:

Daniel 10:20: "Then said he, Knowest thou wherefore I come unto thee? and now will I return to fight with the prince of Persia: and when I am gone forth, lo, the prince of Grecia shall come.

21 But I will shew thee that which is noted in the scripture of truth: and there is none that holdeth with me in these things, but Michael your prince."

There is even one case where Michael resisted Satan himself:

Jude 1:9: "Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee."

In fact, the Bible also tells us that during the Tribulation Michael will lead a charge of angels to evict Satan from Heaven once and for all:

Revelation 12:7: "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,

8 And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.

9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."

Based on all of this, I think it's quite possible that the *angels* are actually the ones who are charged with restraining evil in this world. Daniel 10 gives us a fascinating glimpse at spiritual warfare, where angels of light battle demonic forces. The angel who seems to have the most power is Michael, which Daniel 10:21 refers to as "your prince" and Jude 1:9 calls "the archangel." In my opinion I think that the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2:7 is not the Holy Spirit but is Michael. As you can see, the Bible contains numerous accounts of Michael restraining evil (up to and including resisting the devil himself!), whereas there don't seem to be any accounts of the Holy Spirit doing the same thing. In fact, Michael's entire ministry seems to be focused on that very point!

If this is the case, then for the past two thousand years Michael has been battling to keep the antichrist from appearing. One day God will remove him from the battlefield, and when that day comes the entire world will be plunged into a terrible time. The antichrist will rise to power and kill billions, but in the end he will be slain by the triumphant and returning Son of God:

2 Thessalonians 2:8: “And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:”