

Who Is The Restrainer?

Prophecy is an interesting field. Despite the fact that around a quarter of the entire Bible is devoted to prophecy, many Christians view prophecy as a distraction. There are some people who take the subject seriously and spend a lot of time studying it, but they seem to be the exception. The prevailing attitude seems to be that Jesus probably won't return anytime soon¹, so there's no sense in thinking about it. Jesus' command to "Watch!" is largely ignored (Matthew 24:42), and churches that teach prophecy are rare.

The early church, however, was different. They had all sorts of questions about the Second Coming and Paul spent a lot of time addressing their concerns. One such passage can be found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, which contains a verse I'd like to explore. Here is the passage:

2 Thessalonians 2:1-10: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, 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. 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; 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. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what

1 A view that I believe is quite wrong. The return of Jesus might be very near indeed.

withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. 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: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, 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 addressed some people in the Thessalonian church who were worried that they had missed the rapture. Someone had told them that the seven-year tribulation had already begun, which threw them into a state of panic. (If they had missed the rapture then that meant they weren't saved, which would bring panic to any Christian.) Paul told them those teachers were wrong, and there were several key events which had to take place before the tribulation could begin.

The first point Paul made was that before the tribulation could 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 the Greek word *apostasia*, which is where we get the word apostasy. The “man of sin” is a reference to the antichrist. Before the tribulation period can start there must be a great apostasy and the antichrist must be

revealed. Paul then explained the reason the antichrist hadn't appeared yet was because someone was restraining him. This restraining force must be taken out of the way before he could rise to power. We can find that in verse 6:

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7: “And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. 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 easier to understand:

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7: “And now ye know that which restraineth, to the end that he may be revealed in his own season. For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work: only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way.”

This passage is telling us that someone is actively keeping the antichrist from appearing. The antichrist won't appear until this restraining influence is taken out of the way. Only after that happens will he be able to rise to power.

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

Based on what we know about the Holy Spirit, is it likely that He's the restrainer? In order to answer that question we need

to know what work the Holy Spirit performs. Are there Biblical reasons for thinking He is the ideal candidate for this role?

The Bible 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 us:

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's one thing which is missing: there's no record of the Holy Spirit restraining evil! The Holy Spirit does many amazing and wonderful things, but that activity isn't mentioned. Now, it's possible that the Spirit *does* restrain evil and God just hasn't told us, but that's a weak argument. When looking at what the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit I don't see anything that would support the idea He's restraining the antichrist. That doesn't seem to fit into His ministry.

However, there is another candidate. There's a group of beings who has spent thousands of years restraining evil and battling the forces of darkness. That group is known as the angels, and they're led by Michael the archangel.

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

Psalm 91:9-11: “Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. 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 him and answering his prayer. The demons were forced to retreat when Michael came and provided additional support:

Daniel 10:12-13: “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. 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 because the Bible describes Michael as a tremendously powerful being who's highly effective at resisting the powers of darkness:

Daniel 10:20-21: “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. 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's 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.”

The Bible also tells us that one day Michael will lead an army of angels to evict Satan from Heaven once and for all:

Revelation 12:7-9: “And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. 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 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, who Daniel 10:21 refers to as “your prince” and Jude 1:9 calls “the archangel.” In my opinion that the restrainer mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 isn't the Holy Spirit but is an angel (perhaps Michael). The Bible contains 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 that's 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 known as the tribulation. The antichrist will rise to power and kill more than half of the world's population, 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:”