

2 Thessalonians 2:5-7

PREFACE

A month ago we tabled the discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit during the Tribulation period until we got to v6. Well, we have finally arrived. And what a moment this is; here, once again, is one of those passages that, along with its supporting references, causes the student of God's word to lean back in his chair and let the rich imagery and cosmic circumstances overwhelm the mind.

It is no secret in this room that Linda and I are fans of science fiction and fantasy films. The passage before us has within it some of the same fascinating qualities—supernatural, cosmic forces; world order in flux; the battle between good and evil—but with one critical difference: This is not fiction; there *will* come a day when this drama will play out precisely as described. This is not fantasy—but it *is* a real whiz-bang of a story!

Sidebar: The study and understanding of this passage requires all of us to, as my grade school teachers would say, put on our thinking caps. This is heavy stuff, but well worth the strain on our gray cells.

The apostle Paul leads into this fascinating tale with a series of reminders and gentle rebukes.

v3: Let no one in any way deceive you...

v5: Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

v6: And you know...

Paul says, *I've told you this before. You already know it, but let's go over it again.* Let's read the larger context of our passage.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:5-10.

v6

For almost two thousand years scholars have been debating what Paul refers to with, in v6, "**what** restrains him now," and, in v7, "**he** who now restrains will do so until **he** is taken out of the way" (emphasis added).

Especially confusing for some has been that the verb translated "what restrains" (*to katechon*) is neuter (i.e., presumably a "thing" or a force), while the verb in v7 translated "he who...restrains" (*heos katechon*) is masculine. These, along with the general tone of vague mysticism in these verses, can indeed leave one scratching one's head to discern what Paul is actually saying.

Over the centuries the list of possible identifications has included Michael, Elijah, the apostles, the saints in Jerusalem, the Mosaic law, Paul, Seneca, and many others. Rising to the top, however, of all the possible interpretations has traditionally been the identification of the neuter "**what** restrains" with the Roman Empire, and the masculine "**he** who...restrains" with the Emperor himself.

But after discussing the pros and cons of this interpretation, Robert L. Thomas points out the obvious: “Elimination of this solution is sealed when we remember that the Roman Empire has long since ceased to exist, and the appearance of Christ or the lawless one has yet to take place.”

Let’s back up a minute; let’s not forget who we are dealing with here. The “man of lawlessness”—the Antichrist—will be more than just a wicked man. Look at v9.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:9.

Without at all suggesting equivalency, what Christ is to God the Father, Antichrist is to Satan. As Christ exhibited certain supernatural powers, given Him by His Father, so the Antichrist will exhibit certain supernatural powers, given him by *his* father. Like Judas, he will begin as an ordinary man, but Satan will “enter into” him (Luke 22:3) at some point, sharing with him some of his supernatural powers. Jesus foretold this.

Read Matthew 24:23-25.

Supernatural power requires a supernatural opponent. Verse 6 speaks of a force capable of restraining supernatural evil—and doing so for a very long time, for, as John points out, the “*spirit* of the Antichrist” was in the world even in the first century. The rather obvious identification of the restrainer is God, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Read v6.

And you know what restrains him now

But we still have the quandary of the neuter verb in v6. (Here’s where this gets really good.)

A Technical Explanation

Most of us know that the proper designation for the Spirit of God is the masculine “He” or “Him.” But, when there is a good reason, He can also be referred to in the neuter gender—especially when coupled with the noun *pneuma* (spirit, breath, wind). So when speaking of the Spirit’s *personality*, one would use the masculine, but when one wants to be in agreement with a neuter noun, one would use a neuter verb. For example, as Lange puts it, “The neuter in [v6] denotes the power, the principle; the masculine in [v7], a personality at the head of that power.”

A Corporate Explanation

Which brings us to a second way of looking at this (as a few commentators suggest).

Question: What is removed from the earth before the man of lawlessness is revealed? **Answer:** The church.

As bad as this world’s culture is, imagine how much worse it would be without the influence of the church. Because of the context, I speak of “the church” less as a powerful, authoritative body, as do Catholics, but more as a supernatural force, the key to which is the indwelling Holy Spirit.

It can be said that the church—the world-wide, spiritually interlinked community of believers in Christ Jesus—exerts, as a collective, a binding force upon the evil that dwells in and on a fallen earth—a world that is in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). If the “spirit of the Antichrist” pervades, it is met by the Spirit of Christ, working through His body, the church. Is there any wonder that unimaginable havoc and evil will ensue when every Christian is removed from the earth!

Summary

So to summarize, the “what” in v6 can easily refer to the Holy Spirit, but another way of interpreting the difference between “what” and “He” is that the latter refers to the person and personality of the Holy Spirit, while the former refers to the work He accomplishes on earth through individual believers, as well as the *community* of believers—both of which exert a binding (or at least restricting) force against evil.

Does this not illumine in a fresh way what the apostle John writes in his first letter.

Read 1 John 4:2-4.

...so that in his time he will be revealed.

The “he” and “his” in the second part of v6 is not the same “he” of v7. And once again we have a parallel, *in reverse*, to Christ.

Read Galatians 4:3-5.

To be precise, the word translated “time” in Galatians (*chronos*) is different from the word in our text (*kairos*), but the idea is the same. Paul is saying in Galatians that we were previously enslaved to the base and worthless principles of a fallen world. But then, just when everything was in place and ready, God sent His Son Jesus to redeem us from our natural birthright, so that we could be adopted by Father God.

In Thessalonians he is saying the same thing, except that the situation and characters are in the reverse. For almost two thousand years, so far, the Holy Spirit has been holding down the power of evil in this world. Yes, this world *is* evil, and ruled by the evil one, Satan, but it would be far worse were not the Spirit and the body of Christ here to hold fast against the tsunami of dark forces waiting to overwhelm everything in its path.

But there will come a moment in time—a season, a proper time in the life of the Antichrist—when Father God will declare, “Now!” Suddenly, without warning, the righteous force of the church will disappear from earth, and with it the exerting influence of the Holy Spirit ([more on this in our next session](#)). In their place will flood in evil of all sorts, and the “man of lawlessness” will gradually show himself to be the savior for which the world has been waiting. He will be winsome, agreeable, helpful, because, like his father, he will be a liar of the first order.

Then, after a few years, when he takes his seat in the temple of Jerusalem, he will be revealed for what and who he truly is: the Antichrist, evil incarnate, and the period that follows—the Great Tribulation—will make the previous three-and-a-half years look like a walk in the park.