

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7**PREFACE**

We established in our last session on v6 that the “what” that restrains is the Holy Spirit, as well as that same Spirit working through Christians individually and corporately as the church. We established that the one *being* restrained is the “man of lawlessness,” the son of perdition, the Antichrist.

Verses 6 and 7 are the closing strains of the overture before the curtain rises on the final days, the intricately woven four-act play of Christ’s righteous kingdom being established. Between verses 7 and 8 the curtain rises with His return to gather His brothers and sisters and take them home with Him before, quite literally, all hell breaks loose on earth.

Let’s review our time frame for the opening verses of this chapter. It can be a little confusing because Paul moves effortlessly back and forth in (prophetic) time.

v2: that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Here Paul refers not to the Rapture, but to Christ’s return in power and judgment at the end of the Tribulation.

v3: 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,

The “it” in v3 refers to “the day of the Lord” mentioned in v2, and the rest of the verse describes the first three-and-a-half years of the Tribulation—up to the moment when the Antichrist is revealed for what he truly is.

v4: 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.

V4 describes the climactic moment of the Tribulation, when the Antichrist takes over the Jerusalem temple, declares himself God, and the fullness of his evil is displayed for all to see. This marks the beginning of the *Great* Tribulation—the last three-and-a-half years of the seven-year Tribulation.

v6: And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed.
v:7 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.

In v6 and the beginning of v7 Paul backs up to describe the present situation—present for him, as well as for us. The Holy Spirit, the church and, some believe, civic law, restrain both the “*spirit* of the Antichrist,” as well as, perhaps, “*the* Antichrist.” He awaits the time of God’s choosing to begin his rise to power and dominance.

In the second part of v7 Paul continues forward in (prophetic) time to the moment when the restraining force is removed during the Rapture.

v8: 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;

Finally, in v8 Paul compresses the seven-year Tribulation, through the return of Christ in judgment, into one verse.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7.

A Lampel paraphrase (replacing the pronouns):

And you know that the Holy Spirit restrains the man of lawlessness now, so that in the lawless man's time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only the Holy Spirit, who now restrains, will do so until that same Spirit is taken out of the way.

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work

In v3 Paul refers to the Antichrist as the “*man of lawlessness*,” and here he speaks of the “*mystery of lawlessness*.”

Our focus of late has been on Satan and his man on earth, the Antichrist. But when we trace this “mystery of iniquity,” as the KJV puts it, back to its origin on earth, we discover as the devil’s willing servant not the Antichrist, but man. Indeed, if we trace it *all the way back*, we discover the Creator Himself.

Read Genesis 3:1-6.

Note in v1: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.” Satan was and is a created being—an angel created by God. The serpent in which he manifested himself was created by God. Yet he, with the willing assistance of the first woman and man introduced lawlessness, iniquity, not just on earth, but into the seed of all future generations. Here is mystery indeed.

Note: Please do not misunderstand what I am saying: By this I am not suggesting that God is the root of all evil; James tells us that God does not tempt us toward evil. I am simply pointing out that all of the actors responsible for sin dwelling in this world were beings created by God, which is empirically true from God’s word. That’s all.

W. G. Humphrey: The “mystery of iniquity” is the power unseen, unknown except by its effects, which is ever working in the world for evil—working against the law and will of God, corrupting what has been well done and well begun by man, causing misery in the natural world in all that man has to do with, through the mischief which it works in the moral and spiritual world, in the heart and soul of men.

What makes this a “mystery”? It seems to most of us that lawlessness—just another term for sin, for disobedience to God—is rampant, out there for all to see. But like its namesake, what we see is just the tip of the iceberg; there is far more lying beneath the surface.

Vincent: A mystery does not lie in the obscurity of a thing, but in its secrecy. It is not in the thing, but envelops it. Applied to a truth, it signifies a truth once hidden but now revealed or to be revealed; a truth which without special revelation would be unknown. It is almost universally found in connection with words signifying publication or revelation. (See on Matthew 13:11) The “mystery of lawlessness” is the mass of lawlessness yet hidden, but which is to reveal itself in the person and power of Antichrist. The position of the word is emphatic, emphasizing the concealed character of the evil power.

Bishop Jewell: This mystery, saith St. Paul, doth already work. It shall increase, and go forward, and grow to a perfection. A thorn, when it is young, is soft and gentle; ye may thrust at it with your finger, it will not hurt you: but after it waxeth and groweth hard and stubborn, it will pierce the flesh, and draw blood. A bear, when he is young, is harmless and innocent; ye may dandle it, and dally with it, as with a whelp; it hath no chambers to gripe, no teeth to bite, nor paws to tear: but after, it will grow, and become fierce and cruel like the sire. A serpent, when it is young, is little and pretty; it hath no sting, nor poison; you may take it in your hand, and lay it in your lap, it will not hurt you: after, it will increase in venom, and grow in mischief, and be like itself; then it will shake the sting, and cast poison, and prove dangerous. Such a thorn, such a bear, such a serpent is Antichrist. At the first he shall seem soft, and gentle, and innocent. After, he shall grow fierce, and arm himself with sting and poison. But a thorn, though it be soft, is a thorn: a bear, though he be little, is a bear: a serpent, though he be pretty, is a serpent. Even so Antichrist, though he seem gentle, mild, and simple, yet is he Antichrist. He groweth by degrees, he will be like his sire; his paws will be dreadful, his mouth will be deadly.

only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.

Primarily because of the “what” in v6, we have included the body of Christ, the church, along with the Holy Spirit, in the identification of the restrainer. But in v7 we have only the masculine “he” being used, so the emphasis here is on the Spirit alone.

Read v7.

until he is taken out of the way = heos ek mesou genētai

Most of the phrase “until he is taken out of the way” is self-explanatory, but the word translated “the way” is worth a longer look. The Greek word *mesou* is from the adjective *mesos*, which means “in the middle, in the midst, in between.” In classical Greek it had become a legal term with the meaning of the neutral place between two parties in conflict. In the context of this future point in time—the Rapture, and the start of the Tribulation—it refers to one of the roles the Holy Spirit has been performing since the church age was inaugurated in Acts 2: restricting the power of evil on earth—in a sense, standing between lawlessness and righteousness, but not in this instance as a neutral party.

When He “is taken out of the way” the Spirit is relieved of that duty, thus granting lawlessness free rein on earth, with the Antichrist as instigator and cheerleader.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT DURING THE TRIBULATION

So now we finally come to the question raised more than a month ago: Is there a role on earth for the Holy Spirit during the Tribulation? The answer is, yes indeed—except for the standard caveat regarding the End Times that there are varying opinions and positions on this.

Right now we are in the “Church Age,” and God’s Holy Spirit is key to this epoch. It was His coming—permanently, instead of transitory—to the apostles in Acts 2 that instituted the Church Age, and it will be His being “taken out of the way” that will officially close the Church Age.

I purposely use the language of Paul in 2 Thessalonians—“taken out of the way”—rather than saying that He “leaves.” His role will change—more accurately, will revert, somewhat, to His earlier pre-church role—but it will not cease.

[for portions of what follows I am indebted to Thomas Ice, executive director of the Pre-Trib Research Center, at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and his paper entitled, “The Holy Spirit and the Tribulation.”]

In the Old Testament

The Holy Spirit has been at work in this world from the moment He had a hand in its creation. As far as His work in individuals—that role most familiar to us in the church age—with only a few exceptions the Spirit’s presence was transitory: it entered a person for a specific reason, and it would or could leave after that. When King David cried out in Psalm 51—

Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
(Psalm 51:11)

—there was a very real possibility that the Spirit might depart from him because of his sin. Let’s illustrate this from God’s word, using King Saul as an example. In 1 Samuel 10 the prophet begins the transformation of Saul by anointing him.

Read 1 Samuel 10:1. (Hebrew *mashach* = messiah)

In the verses that follow, Samuel prophesies what will happen to the young man over a period of days—including in v6,

Read 1 Samuel 10:6.

As soon as Saul turned to go, God began his transformation.

Read 1 Samuel 10:9-11.

So Saul was anointed, his heart was changed by God, and the Spirit of God entered him—confirmed by his immediate prophetic utterances. But then Saul began to believe his own press clippings. In Chapter Fifteen Saul is told to wipe out every living thing of the Amalekites—including all the animals. When Samuel confronts the king after the battle, Saul proudly reports, “I have carried out the command of the Lord.” And with one of the funniest retorts in Scripture, Samuel cups a hand to his ear, and says, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?”

And in the next chapter, just moments after David is anointed and the Spirit of God enters him, the Spirit is removed from King Saul—but not just that; God replaced in Saul “the Spirit of the Lord” with “an evil spirit from the Lord.” and once again, the people could immediately see the transformation.

Read 1 Samuel 16:13-15.

The story of King Saul is a pretty good picture of how the Holy Spirit worked in and through people in the days before the church age. He came, He went; He entered to instill specific, required talents (as He did for the creation of the first tabernacle); He instilled faith in and obedience to Yahweh; in humans He was an active force, but He was not, as a rule, a permanent dweller.

During the Church Age

Turn to 1 Corinthians 12.

Since Pentecost, God has been gathering out from the Gentiles a people for His name ([Acts 15:14](#)), and combining that group with the elect remnant of Israel ([Romans 11:1-5](#)) to build the Church. The Holy Spirit plays a key role in this, for it is He who convicts the unbeliever to repent and believe, and it is He who indwells the believer as a surety of salvation, as Comforter, Encourager, as a seal of the promise, and, not least, as the One who continues to convict of sin. By most of us this is referred to as the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.”

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.

The Rapture is not just Jesus sparing His church from the Tribulation; it is the formal, epochal closing of the church doors. As an institution the church closes up shop at the Rapture and the Spirit being “taken out of the way.” As Dr. John Walvoord puts it, “While the Spirit continues a ministry in the world in the tribulation, there is no longer a corporate body of believers knit into one living organism.” So the Spirit’s role in that body is drawn to a close.

During the Tribulation

Working hand-in-hand with the pretribulational position is the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 that the Holy Spirit has been the restrainer, and that when the church is removed at the Rapture, the ministry of the Spirit *through* the church is removed as well. But this does not mean that the Spirit does not remain present and active on earth. Here is how Dr. Thomas Ice explains it:

Thomas Ice: We do believe the Holy Spirit will not be carrying out His present unique ministry related to the Church since the completed body of Christ will be in heaven. Further, we are saying that the Holy Spirit will be present in His transdispensational ministry of bringing the elect of the tribulation to faith in Christ, even though they will not be part of the body of Christ—the Church. The Holy Spirit will also aid Tribulation believers as they live holy lives unto the Lord. The Holy Spirit will also function to seal and protect the 144,000 Jewish witnesses for their great evangelistic ministry as noted in Revelation 7 and 14 and the two witnesses of Revelation 11.

One could say that this is a *variation* on the Spirit's OT ministry. It may not be accurate to say that He simply reverts back to what He was doing during the OT; it will be different in a number of respects. Here is how Dr. Ice concludes his paper:

Thomas Ice: The Rapture could very well be the greatest evangelistic tool in human history. When millions of people disappear from the face of the earth in a split second of time, all kinds of theories and explanations will surface. But many will remember the warnings of friends and loved ones about the truth of the Rapture. In a moment of time, they will realize what has happened. They have been left behind. God will use this mind-numbing realization to bring them to faith in His Son. The Holy Spirit will be active, as He always has throughout history, to bring the elect to salvation in Christ.

Even though pretribulationists believe that many unique aspects of the current work of the Holy Spirit will cease at the rapture, it is not correct to say that we believe the Holy Spirit will not be present during the tribulation. Just as the Holy Spirit will engage in some ministries during the tribulation, relating to the 144,000 witnesses and the two witnesses, that are not occurring during the current church age, so there will cease certain ministries unique to the church which will enable the man of sin to come onto the stage of history.