

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 25

Who (or What) Is the Restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2?

One matter from the eschatological section of 2 Thessalonians 2 tends to confuse readers and elude interpretation: the identity of the “restrainer” or “restraining influence” mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:6. Paul says that this restraining influence in his day prevented the man of lawlessness from being revealed, thus preventing the Day of the Lord from commencing. It is therefore relevant to our investigation of the Day of the Lord in the New Testament to try to ascertain the identity of this restrainer.

Evidently, the Thessalonians already knew what Paul meant when he wrote, “And you know what restrains (τὸ κατέχον) him” (2 Thess 2:6). Paul first uses a present active neuter participle—the “thing that restrains” or “the restraining force,” “restraining influence,” or “restraining condition.” This restraining influence will continue to operate until the time comes for the man of lawlessness to be revealed (2:6). In the next verse, Paul notes that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains (ὁ κατέχων) will do so until he is taken out of the way” (2:7). In this second reference to the restrainer, Paul uses a present active masculine participle. The shift from the neuter to the masculine presents a puzzle. Bruce writes, “Any one undertaking to identify the restraining agency must reckon with the fact that it may be viewed either personally (ὁ κατέχων) or impersonally (τὸ κατέχον). It is plain, moreover, that both the mystery of iniquity and the restraining agency are at work at the time of the writings of the epistle; the restrainer has not yet been removed, therefore the man of lawlessness has not yet appeared, and *a fortiori* the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived.”¹ If Paul had a particular person in mind—say, the archangel Michael or the Roman emperor—then he would most likely have simply stuck with the masculine participle. And if he had a particular impersonal condition in mind, like the system of human government, then it makes the shift from the neuter to the masculine participle difficult to explain. The term κατέχω simply means to hold back, prevent, or hinder something or someone.² There is

¹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 45 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 171.

² BDAG, 532–33.

no obvious New Testament or Septuagint parallel to the idea of something or someone holding back or preventing the coming of eschatological persons or events. Understandably, commentators have offered numerous—and sometimes desperate—explanations for what restrains the coming lawless one.³

Bruce writes, “They [the Thessalonians] knew because they had been told; later readers are at a disadvantage compared with them, and have to guess.”⁴ Or do we? If it is really the case that Paul managed to cover details of eschatological events like the coming of the lawless one and the identity of the restrainer even in the short time he spent in Thessalonica, then it is reasonable to assume he was able to cover these same topics in other places where he preached the gospel and planted churches. In fact, the confusion and deception regarding future things that occurred in connection with Thessalonica may have prompted Paul to be even more diligent in clarifying such matters wherever he ministered in the gospel. If Paul did teach the identity of the restrainer far and wide during his apostolic ministry, then we would expect to see in the early generations of post-apostolic Christian writings echoes of that teaching of someone or something that restrains the forces of evil—the “mystery of lawlessness”—and the coming of the Day of the Lord judgments. It is reasonable to inquire, then, whether we can discern the theme of a restraining person or influence in the first couple generations of the church.

Before I examine the early Christian testimony concerning a restrainer of wickedness and the end times, I should first point out that early Christians did not see a real theological separation between God’s works through the Spirit and the means he uses to accomplish his purposes. So, whether we ultimately understand the restrainer to be human government, the church, the conscience, an angel, or something else, God is ultimately the one who does the work through various means. To answer that the Holy Spirit restrains evil is ultimately correct, but what means of restraint was Paul describing in 2 Thessalonians 2?

In the early third century, Tertullian gives us this following interpretation of the restrainer: “What obstacle is there but the Roman state, the falling away of which, by being scattered into ten kingdoms, shall introduce Antichrist upon (its own ruins)?” (*Res. 24* [ANF 3]). This statement is the earliest clear interpretation of the passage as “human government.” Interestingly, Hippolytus of Rome also identifies the restrainer of 2 Thessalonians 2 as the fourth beast in Daniel 7; that is, Rome: “Who then is he that now restraineth but the fourth beast; and when he is removed and

³ Some understand the “restrainer” to refer to the Holy Spirit, as in John 16:7–8. Others refer it to the Roman emperor (personal) and the empire (impersonal), or to the work of human government to restrain sin by its God-ordained system of punishment and reward (Rom 13:1–5) (Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 171–72). Some apply it to the church’s spiritual restraint on wickedness (Matt 16:18–19). Still others have identified the restrainer as the archangel Michael (Dan 12:1–2). Perhaps it is the Jewish state, or Satan, or maybe even Paul himself is the restrainer and the preaching of the gospel the restraining thing.

⁴ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 170.

taken out of the way, the deceiver shall come.”⁵ Later in the fourth century, Chrysostom writes that “some indeed say, the grace of the Spirit, but others the Roman empire, to whom I most of all accede. Wherefore? Because if he meant to say the Spirit, he would not have spoken obscurely, but plainly, that even now the grace of the Spirit, that is the gifts, withhold him. And otherwise he ought now to have come, if he was about to come when the gifts ceased; for they have long since ceased. But because he said this of the Roman empire, he naturally glanced at it, and speaks covertly and darkly” (*Fourth Homily on 2 Thessalonians* [NPNF¹13]). Thus over a century after Paul, Tertullian and Hippolytus, likely relying heavily on Romans 13, argue that the Roman Empire was the restrainer of God to hold back evil. Yet, various perspectives continued to be held. However, in my study of second century literature, I have been unable to identify any clear development of the idea that human government holds back evil and God’s judgment, though some must have held this position since it suddenly appeared in the third century.

When we look at the earliest days of the church and trace the theme of the restraint of wickedness, demonic powers, and even end-times judgments, a different picture emerges. The tradition is early, widespread, consistent, and has no competing perspectives—just the situation we might expect had Paul actually taught the identity of the restraining influence among the numerous churches he planted.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110)

Early in the second century, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, wrote: “Therefore make every effort to come together as often as possible to give thanks and glory to God. For when you gather together frequently, the powers of Satan are destroyed and his destruction is brought to an end by the unanimity of your faith. There is nothing better than peace by which all war in heaven and on earth is abolished” (Ign. *Eph.* 13.1–2 [Brannan]).

Here, the gathered church engaged in prayer and worship wages spiritual warfare against Satan and establishes peace in heaven and on earth.

Aristides of Athens (c. 125)

In the early second century, the apologist Aristides of Athens makes the following claim regarding the presence of Christians in the wicked world: “And because they [Christians] acknowledge the goodness of God towards them, lo! On account of them there flows forth the beauty that is in the

⁵ J. H. Kennedy, *Part of the Commentary of S. Hippolytus on Daniel (Lately Discovered by Dr. Basilios Georgiades), with Introduction, Notes, and Translation* (Dublin: Hodges & Figgis, 1888), 37–38.

world.... And I have no doubt that the world stands by reason of the intercession of Christians” (Arist. *Apol.* 16).⁶

Thus according to Aristides, when Christians pray and behave in conformity with their calling, their active presence preserves the world.

Justin Martyr (c. 150)

In the second book of his apology explaining and defending the Christian faith against critics, Justin writes:

Therefore God postpones the collapse and dissolution of the universe (through which the bad angels, the demons, and men would cease to exist), because of the Christian seed, which He knows to be the cause in nature [of the world’s preservation]. If such were not the case, it would be impossible for you to do the things you do and be influenced by the evil demons; but the fire of judgment would descend and would completely dissolve everything, just as the flood waters once left no one but him, with his family. (*2 Apol.* 7 [Falls])

Here, the abiding presence of Christians in the world postpones the coming judgment; if Christians were removed, then fire would utterly destroy all the ungodly forces of wickedness—human and angelic.

Theophilus of Antioch (c. 170–185)

In a beautiful passage describing the role of the church in the world, Theophilus, bishop of Antioch in the latter part of the second century, wrote:

For as the sea, if it had not had the influx and supply of the rivers and fountains to nourish it, would long since have been parched by reason of its saltness; so also the world, if it had not had the law of God and the prophets flowing and welling up sweetness, and compassion, and righteousness, and the doctrine of the holy commandments of God, would long ere now have come to ruin, by reason of the wickedness and sin which abound in it. And as in the sea there are islands, some of them habitable, and well-watered, and fruitful, with havens and harbours in which the storm-tossed may find refuge,— so God

⁶ Translation from J. Rendel Harris, ed. and trans., *The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893).

has given to the world which is driven and tempest-tossed by sins, assemblies—we mean holy churches—in which survive the doctrines of the truth, as in the island-harbours of good anchorage; and into these run those who desire to be saved, being lovers of the truth, and wishing to escape the wrath and judgment of God. (*Autol.* 2.14 [ANF 2])

According to Theophilus, the church, mediating the blessing of God’s revelation as well as truth and virtue to the world, prevents and delays the ruin of the world.

Epistle to Diognetus (c. 150–200)

In an oft-quoted passage drawing parallels between the soul-body relationship and the church-world relationship, the anonymous author of the letter to Diognetus writes:

But to put it simply, what the soul is in the body, this *is what* the Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed throughout all the limbs of the body, and Christians throughout the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body but is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world but are not of the world. The invisible soul is guarded in the visible body. And Christians are known as being in the world, but their religion remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul and fights against it, having been wronged in no way, because it is forbidden to indulge in its pleasures. The world also hates Christians, having been wronged in no way, because they are opposed to its pleasure. The soul loves the flesh that hates *it*, and its members, and Christians love those who hate *them*. The soul has been locked up in the body, but it holds the body together, and Christians are restrained in the world as in prison, but they hold the world together. The soul, *though* immortal, dwells in a mortal tent, and Christians temporarily dwell in corruptibility, waiting for incorruptibility in heaven. When badly treated in food and drink, the soul becomes even better, and Christians, when punished daily, increase even more. God has appointed them to so great a position, which is not right for them to reject. (*Diogn.* 6.1–10 [Brannan])

Though filled with imagery that suggests the many blessings the world receives because of the presence of Christians, the most pertinent line is in 6.7: “The soul has been locked up in the body, but it holds the body together, and Christians are restrained in the world as in prison, but they hold the world together.”

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 200)

Though I cited Tertullian as the first proponent of the view that the restrainer is the Roman Empire, elsewhere in his writings Tertullian displays a different—or at least nuanced—view:

There is also another and a greater necessity for our offering prayer in behalf of the emperors, nay, for the complete stability of the empire, and for Roman interests in general. For we know that a mighty shock impending over the whole earth—in fact, the very end of all things threatening dreadful woes—is only retarded by the continued existence of the Roman empire. We have no desire, then, to be overtaken by these dire events; and in praying that their coming may be delayed, we are lending our aid to Rome’s duration. (*Apol.* 32 [ANF 3]).

At first glance, it appears that the Roman Empire is the agent that delays the coming of end-times judgment; but upon closer examination, Christians offering prayers for the delay of the coming doom indirectly aids to the continuation of the empire, which necessarily must be removed in the judgments of the Day of the Lord. Several chapters later, Tertullian writes, “And, for all that is said, if we compare the calamities of former times, they fall on us more lightly now, since God gave Christians to the world; for from that time virtue put some restraint on the world’s wickedness, and men began to pray for the averting of God’s wrath” (*Apol.* 41 [ANF 3]). Here, the presence of praying, righteous Christians restrain the world’s wickedness and the wrath of God.

Conclusion

As seen above, a widespread understanding in the early church was that the presence of the church in the world promoted righteousness and virtue, held back wickedness and vice, and thus prevented the full manifestation of satanic power, the revelation of the man of lawlessness, and the unleashing of the Day of the Lord. This is consistent with the role of the Spirit as described by Jesus in John 16:8: to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment; yet because God employs means, this unique work of the Spirit in the era of the new covenant is accomplished by means of the church. If the special ministry of the Holy Spirit functioning in and through the presence of the church is what restrains wickedness and holds back the full revelation of the man of lawlessness, then the removal of the church from the earth would allow the apostasy to occur, the man of lawlessness to be revealed, and the Day of the Lord to commence. This, then, may conform to Paul’s teaching in 1 Thessalonians concerning the rescue of the church from the coming wrath and Day of the Lord (1 Thess 1:10; 4:13–5:11).

This solution accommodates Paul’s use of both the neuter and masculine participle—as the presence of the church in the world is thought of both as personal and impersonal—the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, a new man, a bride—and because ultimately the restrainer is the Holy Spirit himself, working through the church. However, if these echoes of the restraining power as Christians in the world is not what Paul meant in 1 Thessalonians 2, then we are left with Morris’s remark: “The plain fact is that we do not know. It is best honestly to admit this and not to try to force the passage into conformity with some theory we have evolved on the basis of imperfect knowledge.”⁷

⁷ Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 13 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 129.