
2 Thessalonians 2

Verses 5-8: The Mystery of Lawlessness -- The Restrainer -- The Epiphany of His Parousia

Ministry Reading

Opening Reading -- 2 Thessalonians 2:5-8

2 Thessalonians 2:5-8

Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? 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. 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.

Paul Teaching Prophecy to New Converts in Three Weeks

Verse 5 contains a remarkable statement: 'Do ye not remember that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?' Paul had spent approximately three weeks in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2). And in those three weeks he had taught these new converts not only the gospel but the character and role of the Antichrist in prophecy -- the very things we are reading in 2 Thessalonians 2. Many voices in Christendom say that newly converted believers should not be given deep or prophetic teaching too quickly. The apostle's practice was the opposite. He pressed as much truth as possible into as little time as possible, with a sense that every moment counted. The tremendous change wrought in those Thessalonians is to be attributed to God the Holy Spirit and to the power of the gospel -- the

most powerful thing in the world. Saints need to be armed quickly.

The Mystery of Lawlessness Already Working

Verse 7 names the mystery of iniquity -- which Darby translates as the mystery of lawlessness -- as already at work in the apostle's day. This is a hidden thing, but one that saints can know about. And the essence of it is lawlessness: acting of oneself without any reference to the will of God. Sin in its true nature is lawlessness -- not simply the transgression of the Mosaic law, for that law came with Moses and sin existed long before. Darby pointed out that 1 John 3:4 is properly rendered 'sin is lawlessness,' not merely 'sin is the transgression of the law.' It is self-will at the foundation.

Every time God introduces a new line of things, there is a characteristic sin that offends against the very thing He is bringing in. When government was introduced, Noah was found failing to govern himself. When the law was given, Israel was already worshipping the golden calf before Moses came down the mountain. When priesthood was instituted, Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire. When God sent down the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to form the assembly, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit -- acting in self-will and concealment, as though the Spirit of God was not there with detecting and governmental power. That was not accidental. It was the characteristic sin against the characteristic feature of what God was bringing in. And so the mystery of lawlessness was already at work in the apostolic assembly from almost the very beginning.

The Restrainer: Who Now Withholds

There appear to be two aspects of the restraint in verses 6 and 7. Verse 6 speaks of that which withholds -- a neuter, an impersonal force. Verse 7 speaks of him who now restrains -- a personal being. The most natural and satisfying explanation is that both refer to the Holy Spirit: the impersonal aspect looking at

the restraining effect of His presence in the world, and the personal aspect identifying Him as the Being who exercises that restraint.

The objection is raised that the Holy Spirit is omnipresent and therefore cannot be taken out of the way. But this misses an important distinction. The Holy Spirit was omnipresent throughout the Old Testament -- He moved upon the face of the waters in Genesis 1, He was given to and taken from men, He acted throughout the prophetic history of Israel. And yet on the day of Pentecost He came down from heaven in a new and special capacity: to form the assembly, to baptize believers into one body, to indwell them collectively and individually as the temple of God. That special capacity began at Pentecost. It will end when the restrainer is taken out of the way -- which, read together with 1 Thessalonians 4, marks the other end of the period during which the assembly of God is in the world. Omnipresence is unaffected; the special function ceases.

The practical significance of this is that every true believer, as indwelt by the Holy Spirit, has a restraining effect upon the evil of the world around them. Not by doing something particular, but by being something -- a person of God whose very presence makes lawlessness uncomfortable. The filthy joke that goes flat when a godly man is present; the coarse language that stops when someone is there who lives in the presence of God -- these small illustrations point to the larger principle. The assembly indwelt by the Spirit is the restraint against the full development of the mystery of lawlessness.

Now and His Own Time: A Pre-Tribulation Implication

There is a now and a then in verses 6 and 7. He is to be revealed in his own time -- and that time is distinct from the now. Verse 7 says 'he who now restrains' -- the word now is deliberately placed. There is a now, which is the time of the church in the world: from Pentecost to the removal of the assembly. And there is his own time, which will follow the removal of the restrainer. This is a strong

indication of a pre-tribulation rapture embedded in the very structure of the passage.

The promise to Philadelphia in Revelation 3:10 connects with this: 'Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.' To be kept from the hour is to be kept out of the time of it entirely -- not kept safely through it. The construction is the same as John 17 where the Lord prays that His own be kept out of the evil. And this is sharply contrasted with Jeremiah 30:7, where Jacob will be saved out of his trouble -- meaning he will be in it and brought through it. Christians are kept out of the hour; Israel is saved out of it. These are not the same thing, and confusing them produces insoluble difficulties.

The Brightness of His Coming: The Epiphany of His Parousia

Verse 8 contains a remarkable expression: 'the brightness of his coming,' which Darby renders 'the appearing of his coming,' or in the Greek, the epiphany of his parousia. Now, if parousia -- presence, coming -- always implied visibility, then this phrase would be redundant: the appearing of his appearing. But it is not redundant, because it is not redundant. The word parousia (presence) does not by itself determine whether that presence is visible or not. There can be an unseen presence and a seen presence. When the text speaks of the epiphany -- the outshining, the manifestation to the eye -- of His parousia, it implies that His parousia itself does not necessarily involve that outshining. This has a direct bearing on the rapture: one cannot argue that the catching up of the saints at the Lord's coming must be a visible public event merely because the word parousia is used of it. The text itself rules that out.

The epiphany of His parousia is the appearing of the Lord Jesus in glory at the end of the tribulation -- the bright outshining that will consume the man of sin

with the breath of His mouth and annul him by that appearing. The word 'annul' (Darby's rendering) is stronger than 'destroy': it is brought to nothing, as though the wreckage does not even remain. Everything the Antichrist represents -- every lie about the Lord Jesus, including the ancient lie that His disciples stole His body -- will be annulled by the brightness of that coming. It will be as though they never were.

The Lord Jesus Who Shall Consume Him

The expression used in verse 8 is 'the Lord Jesus' -- not simply 'the Lord' or 'Christ.' There is a reason. The man of sin is the biggest thief the Jewish people will ever have encountered, because he is stealing the affections that belong to the Messiah -- who turns out to be the Lord Jesus. And it is in the character of Lord Jesus that He will consume him. There is an affection of relationship that attaches to that name. He is going to consume him with the breath of His mouth -- and there is a divine irony in this: the Antichrist will give breath to the image of the beast (Revelation 13), making it appear to live. And he will be dealt with by the breath of the mouth of the Lord Jesus.

* * *

Lord willing.