



“He Who Now Restrains”

*Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And **you know what restrains him now**, so that in his time he will be revealed. 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**.*

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; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. — 2 Thessalonians 2:5-12

This passage contains one of the most controversial and problematic issues in the arena of Bible interpretation. The Apostle Paul speaks to the Thessalonians as if it is a given as to the identity of “**he who now restrains**” (1 The 2:7) because he plainly revealed it when he was previously present with them, but for everyone else, nowhere in Scripture is it plainly stated by Paul or any other author as to whom he is specifically referring. The original Thessalonian audience knew without explanation to whom Paul referred while we are left to debate the meaning of this reference.

As a result, there is much more than polite discussion among Christians as to whom this refers, nowhere found to be more contentious at present than between those who hold the contrasting views of Pre-Tribulationism and Pre-Wrath. A notable number on both sides even go to the extreme of declaring their opposition to be heretics and false teachers leading Christians to the Lake of Fire based on this issue. The majority of the Pre-Trib position hold that this is referring to the Holy Spirit, while the overwhelming supporters of Pre-Wrath are equally dogmatic in their insistence this is the Archangel Michael. How is it possible for Bible-teaching expositors to agree on every fundamental doctrine which matters, such as salvation, justification and sanctification, but their divergence on this particular point actually invokes pronouncements of the difference between going to heaven or hell, or at the least, results in disfellowship of members of the Body of Christ?

A Common Point of Agreement

Each side (Pre-Wrath and Pre-Trib) has points in their overall eschatology with which I strongly concur and those which I categorically reject. In other words, there are things which I personally embrace in both positions. One of the near universal items of

agreement by both sides, to which I also subscribe, is that the 1st Seal assigned to the white horse is the Antichrist coming in a counterfeit of Christ.

*Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, "Come." I looked, and behold, **a white horse**, and he who sat on it had **a bow**; and **a crown** was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. — Revelation 6:1-2*

Satan's favorite tactic is to counterfeit Christ, and here it is an exceptionally well-planned execution of a **pre-counterfeit** in that he imitates the future return of Christ on a white horse. (Rev. 19:11-16) Only instead of "*a sharp sword*" (Rev. 19:15), the counterfeit has "*a bow*", and instead of "*many diadems*" (Rev. 19:12) the imitation has just the one crown. Both come to usher in their respective earthly kingdom but with an entirely different agenda and ultimate result. Whereas Christ will establish His Millennial Kingdom and its thousand years of peace, the Antichrist will initially imitate a false peace before bringing his kingdom to its final destruction after a mere 7 years.

This is key to understanding Satan's tactics, that he regularly exhibits a counterfeit which looks similar to the authentic, except twisting it into a presentation of how the world would like to see it. At first blush it has the look and feel of the authentic, but with the same kind of added worldly flare Hollywood brings to the production. It is designed to entice and engage an audience. But examining it against Scripture always quickly exposes it for the staged fraud that it truly is.

This is illustrated for us in the very first scriptural revelations of the Antichrist. In Daniel 2, God first provides a dream to Nebuchadnezzar, the Gentile ruler of the world. The interpretation is provided by God through the Prophet Daniel, but the vision is a decidedly one-sided view of the Antichrist as the world will see him. It is an impressive image of decreasingly valuable precious metals, but is topped by gold and silver and is an impressive piece of eye candy from the world's perspective. This is how earth dwellers love to envision those in power. Nebuchadnezzar is so infatuated himself that he'll later proceed to fashion an entire image of gold in his own likeness and demand it be worshiped with an accompanying dramatic stage show. (Dan. 3)

But then in Daniel 7 God provides this vision to His Prophet Daniel, showing how God views this exact, same figure and his respective kingdoms as ugly, horrifying beasts who are animated by a satanic agenda. The deceived world who accepts and welcomes the Antichrist wants to see him as in Daniel 2, the people of God who assess him according to Scripture will see him as presented in Daniel 7 and in Revelation 13 where the theme of the beast is extended even further. But in the beginning he will come as a pre-counterfeit looking enough like Christ to satiate the world's appetite for a ruler wrapped in their idea of the ideal leader in the 1st Seal and as an appealing figure in the character of Daniel 2. ("*...they worshiped the dragon...saying, 'Who is like the Beast...'*" — Rev. 13:4) Meanwhile, across even the most popular eschatologies there appears to be a majority consensus that the rider on the white horse is nothing short of the Antichrist.

This is first and foremost the main reason I do not accept the Pre-Wrath proposal that "*he who now restrains*" is the Archangel Michael. If I did accept the interpretation he is an angelic being, then the number one candidate is identified here in Scripture when the Antichrist is released or "unrestrained" in the 1st Seal:

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*Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard **one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, "Come."** I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. — Revelation 6:1-2*

The textual answer to the Pre-Wrath interpretation that the restrainer is an angelic being would therefore be explicitly stated in Scripture when the Antichrist is released by the utterance of the first living creature. By all reasonable rules of Bible interpretation Michael is disqualified and the first living creature must be instead accepted in that role because the text plainly states that the Antichrist is released by the first living creature with the powerful command, "...saying as with a voice of thunder, 'Come'". I don't have to address the complicated arguments rising from the strained citations of Michael in the book of Daniel as offered by Pre-Wrath advocates because Revelation 6:1-2 provides an overt and categorical statement of such a figure releasing the Antichrist, which is whom they also teach as the identity of the rider on the white horse.

But did you notice what I did there, and why using the Pre-Wrath presupposition is still off target when it comes to identifying the restrainer as an angelic entity? I sort of lifted something out of the text to justify their supposition instead of properly exegeting the **whole** passage in context. Read the text again and circle exactly Who is responsible: the living creature cannot give the command until Christ the Lamb breaks the seal! It takes a member of the Godhead to release the satanic counterfeit. No angelic being or attributable alternative is holding Satan's protégé back, but only the divine. Such heavenly servants of Christ only act on the instructions given to them by the Godhead; the authority and resulting action is always first initiated by a member of the triune Godhead.

As It Has Always Been

This should come as no surprise to us because this is the way that it has always been; Satan has **always** been restrained by the Godhead. In the very first book of the Bible to be written, handed down long before the Pentateuch transcribed by Moses, the account of Job made this clear from the very outset:

*Now there was a day when **the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD**, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?"*

Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it."

The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil."

Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face."

*Then the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, **only do not** put forth your hand on him."*

So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD. — Job 1:6-12

Satan has **always** been restrained. He has **never** been allowed to act as he wants whenever he wants. And even when he is allowed to act, it is within limits set by the Godhead. And in Job's account is the very scriptural refutation that no other being, angelic or otherwise, "restrains" Satan because **all** "the sons of God", both those still with Him under the command of Michael and those who rebelled and took the side and leadership of Satan "came to present themselves before the LORD". Michael and company are just as "restrained" before the Godhead as Satan and his fallen companions. All of the good angelic beings as well as every fallen demon counterpart are all restrained by the Godhead and equally standing before the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Even when Christ took human bodily form, Satan was still subject to Him as evidenced in the many times Christ healed the demon-possessed, the demons often professing publicly Christ's authority over them. But in particular is Christ's statement concerning Satan's request regarding Peter's impending denial of Christ in the most critical hours:

*"Simon, Simon, behold, **Satan has demanded permission to sift you** like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." — Luke 22:31-32*

Satan needed permission. Scripture is repeatedly clear in the fact that Satan has **always** been restrained by boundaries set by nothing less than the Godhead. Instead, what Michael does in regard to Satan involves full-out warfare in the course of the expulsion of not just Satan individually, but all who have joined in rebellion with the devil:

*And there was **war in heaven**, Michael and his angels **waging war** with the dragon. The dragon and his angels **waged war**, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; **he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him**. — Revelation 12:7-9*

The specific term in 1 Thessalonians 2:6-7 rendered in English as "restrains" is "katecho" (Strong's #2722), which carries with it the meaning of to suppress, hinder, withhold or detain. It is frequently found in Scripture with these and other closely related meanings so that we really don't have to guess as to what it is specifically referring. Contrast this with that which Michael is specified as performing in Scripture of waging war so as to forcibly remove Satan and company. This is not "restraining" but combat to forcibly remove them because they are resisting and want to retain their access to heaven.

Even in Daniel 10, it is the angelic messenger sent to Daniel who is himself "restrained" and prevented from coming for a time to Daniel by demonic power, and Michael who **removes** the spiritual enemy's restraint so as to rescue the messenger:

*“But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was **withstanding me** for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, **came to help me**, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia. — Daniel 10:13*

In other words, Michael does not release or **un**-restrain Satan’s worker, but gains the angel’s release by overcoming the **demonic** restraint holding God’s messenger back. Michael isn’t restraining the demonic for a time and at some point withdrawing his restraint so as to release the satanic as is the case in 2 Thessalonians, but taking action to free God’s messenger who was restrained by the opposition from completing his mission. Michael rescues the messenger **from** the restraint of the demonic.

And if we read the reference to Michael in Daniel 12:1 in the full context of the overall message in which it is given, which is the full three chapters of Daniel 10-12— they are a single contiguous message with no chapter or verse designations in the original manuscript, Michael is categorically identified in an additional role as a **protector** of Israel. His chief activity is directly associated with rescuing God’s people, just as he rescued the angelic messenger previously sent to Daniel.

*“Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, **everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued**. — Daniel 12:1*

No, I cannot accept that the restrainer is Michael, and even if I did embrace the premise that such refers to an angelic entity, then by the obvious rules of biblical exegesis I would have to endorse the one such figure overtly referenced in Scripture, the first living creature assigned to the 1st Seal. Using their own standard, this interpretation is rendered null by a direct and overt statement in the plain text of God’s Word. It is a notable contradiction when they specify that the 1st Seal is the release of the Antichrist but overlook the mechanics of what is taking place, not acknowledging the role of the first living creature which actually fulfills their premise.

The Alternative View

Although the overwhelming majority of adherents to the Pre-Tribulation eschatology counter that the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit, this view is complicated by divergent interpretations within that group as to the mechanics and specifics of this role. These views often and directly conflict with each other, so if this interpretation is correct, we must still navigate some variations so as to ascertain which, exactly, is scripturally accurate. Whereas Pre-Wrath advocates are found to be in a much more unified alignment in their support of Michael as the fulfillment of this verse, the Pre-Trib community as it stands today begins with a near universal endorsement of the Holy Spirit and then splinters into divergent explanations.

Probably the most important and widely held false explanation of the Restrainer as the Holy Spirit is embodied in explanations which can be summed up in various ways of stating, “The Holy Spirit is removed and goes back to heaven simultaneous to the Rapture of the Church and therefore no longer restrains.” And, of course, this being proposed by holders of Pre-Tribulationism who maintain that the Rapture takes place **before** the final week of years, they see this as transpiring even before the 1st Seal is opened and as

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occurring during the *entire* final 7 years. Furthermore, most do not make the connection to the Abomination of Desolation, resulting in many manipulating this passage in 2 Thessalonians in ways never seen before. (A topic I've previously and exhaustively visited in the Walk with the Word commentary, "[When Change is Forbidden](#)").

If the Holy Spirit could be "removed" in this manner, then He is not a member of the Godhead. The Godhead is omniscient (all-knowing) and omni-present (always present), among many other shared divine and eternal qualities. Where God the Father and God the Son are found, so is God the Holy Spirit. And certainly the Holy Spirit cannot "go back" to heaven because He has always been, always is, and always will be present as an equal member of the Godhead. This pneumatological error overlooks the very basic scriptural fact that the Holy Spirit has always been and always is around even though He has worked differently from time to time; but He has never "come and gone" in the manner they are describing. Such seem to confuse the various and multiple outpourings of the Spirit with some kind of literal coming and going.

In the Old Testament economy, the Holy Spirit was only given on an individual basis to specific individuals anointed by the Godhead, most notably kings of Israel, high priests, and prophets. All of the exceptions outside of these categories are still examples of an individual anointing. This was true up until Pentecost after the Resurrection. While the Apostles and followers of Christ may have at times been individually empowered by the Holy Spirit, they never received a permanent indwelling until the Resurrection, and that from Christ personally.

*And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, **He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.** — John 20:20-22*

The fundamental change in the way the Holy Spirit begins to work through all believers is what takes place some fifty days later at Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit no longer works exclusively on an individual basis, but is now outpoured on all members of the Body of Christ. But between the Resurrection and Pentecost the Holy Spirit was given and continued operating among the embryonic Church on an individual basis.

If the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit per the passage in 2 Thessalonians, ceasing to restrain is speaking of a work of the Holy Spirit and not to the erroneous notion that He leaves and goes back to heaven with the raptured Church. It is addressing a change when the Holy Spirit works differently beginning with the Abomination of Desolation as the triggering event. But as we will see, He is *not* changing anything where *believers* are concerned, but this is entirely focused on *unbelievers*— the earth dwellers embracing the "*son of destruction*". No angelic agency is ever found within Scripture to have the power to effect this kind of global spiritual change.

This notion of the Holy Spirit leaving leads to even more serious doctrinal error when it comes to the biblical working of the Holy Spirit and extends much further into the substance of one's faith than just having to do with the timing of the Rapture. For instance, it is difficult to find someone advocating this notion of the Holy Spirit "going back" to Heaven with the raptured Church who does not then go on to further assert that back on earth, after both have left, the largest spiritual revival in history will take place. Really? People will be able to come to Christ without the presence of the Holy Spirit? This

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is just one example of how error leads to more serious error as now we are not only dealing with a flawed teaching on the working of the Holy Spirit, but it now fundamentally undermines the very doctrine and working of salvation. Such things really do matter when we realize the follow-on effects which often extend into doctrinal issues beyond just the prophetic.

Believers vs. Non-Believers

A major change in the working of the Holy Spirit is documented as a major feature of Christ's Resurrection. Although He initially imparts the Holy Spirit to the individuals who followed His ministry and who form the foundation for the Church to come, 50 days hence beginning with Pentecost the norm going forward for all believers is that all will receive the Holy Spirit upon authentic acceptance of the work of the cross. This coming adjustment has a further parallel which Jesus specifies is going to be a realized change worldwide in the role of the Holy Spirit:

*"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; **concerning sin**, because they do not believe in Me; and **concerning righteousness**, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and **concerning judgment**, because the ruler of this world has been judged. — John 16:8-11*

Notice that this is specifically qualified as a role for His working in the world, and is verified that the target is "*concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me*"— that is, the unsaved. For believers, the issue is "*concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me*"—in other words, believers are going to have to live by faith according to His Word. But take special note of how the Godhead exercises Their rule over Satan when Jesus also states, "*and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged*". There is a corresponding standard for the unsaved, the saved, and "*the ruler of this world*". Once again the Godhead, and in this case the Holy Spirit, is specified as being in a position over Satan and also working in different, respective ways among the saved and unsaved alike.

Now compare this with that which Paul specifies will take place in the wake of the removal of this restraint:

*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; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason **God will send upon them a deluding influence** so that **they will believe what is false**, in order that **they all may be judged** who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. — 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12*

With Christ's provision of the Holy Spirit there is the accompanying work to convict the world in an effort to turn them back toward Jesus, but after the restraint is lifted there is the "*activity of Satan*" which is the specific thing which becomes effective, not against the whole world for believer and non-believer alike, but for those who do not "*receive the*

love of the truth so as to be saved". Through the Antichrist, it is the satanic "power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness" which is no longer restrained which will be embraced exclusively by "those who perish".

This blazes a path for those who "did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" — a clear qualification this does not apply to believers, so that all the earth dwellers are left with is "a deluding influence" leading to judgment. There is a very big spiritual change which takes place here that is not simply geo-political, but a different spirit at work, or at least a completely different spiritual environment from this point forward for the unsaved. The nature of that change is expressed as "the activity of Satan".

But under no circumstances can the Holy Spirit be withdrawn or removed from any believer. Just as Christ first announced the Holy Spirit would begin to work on a worldwide level among the unsaved, there is likewise a change coming in the worldwide working of deception and delusion among the unsaved on a global level when that milestone transpires. Even though He has altered His approach at different times on a comprehensive scale where the world is concerned, He never changes for believers regardless of the conditions.

*"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, **that He may be with you forever**; that is the Spirit of truth, **whom the world cannot receive**, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because **He abides with you and will be in you**. — John 14:16-17*

There is the contrast of believers who have "the Spirit of truth", and non-believers who "did not receive the love of the truth". So even if we hold to the Holy Spirit as being the Restrainer, we have to reject the Pre-Trib faction who begins with that assertion but follows up with an explanation of an unbiblical working of the Holy Spirit and His leaving and going back to heaven, or other claims that the Holy Spirit changes where believers are concerned.

The Wrong Emphasis

Likewise, there are other assertions where commentators attempt to extrapolate events from the Apostles and the earliest believers during the 50 days between the Resurrection and Pentecost, even dogmatically asserting that the removal of restraint means reverting back to their imposed characterization of the environment of that time. Such draw parallels to a time when the Church is said to be "disorganized", working on an individual basis, and not really effective, but for me personally, such details take me out of my comfort zone. While Jesus clearly indicates, "...night is coming when no one can work" (Jn. 9:4), this is not saying this is due to the Church becoming disorganized and ineffective, but rather describing the increasing hardness of heart of non-believers who will no longer respond to us. Paul is providing an explanation of exactly why and when that night arrives in the prophetic timeline when the world will become completely unresponsive upon being given over to "the activity of Satan" and a simultaneous delusion so pervasive that the unsaved will no longer respond to anything else.

It is not unreasonable to posit that the Holy Spirit as Restrainer is describing a time when He will work again in a different manner because He has done it before so as to provide the precedent He can do it again. Such prophetic patterns, while being understood by the reflections which came before them, are never exact duplicates, especially when it comes to the ultimate fulfillment. There have already been many examples of the Abomination

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of Desolation, but the final one is distinct from its predecessors; there are many examples of Babylon, but they are only partial fulfillments of the final “Babylon the Great”. We can see how past iterations suggest particular things to be broadly found in the final one to come, but the last one is always and ultimately unique to itself and never a clone of one of the previous iterations.

The Right Emphasis

Some have described this time as a period of confusion or at least disorganization as the Holy Spirit reverts to exclusively working on an individual basis again, sometimes using the description, “a reversal of Pentecost”. The only thing Paul specifies that will result from the lifting of this restraint is a change in the way things work for **non**-believers, in that their unbelief will be given over to unprecedented deception, delusion and judgment. Not only is nothing pertaining to this milestone listed which pertains to believers, but this section is followed up by Paul’s reassurance of the security and permanence of our salvation in Christ:

*¹³But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has **chosen you** from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. ¹⁴It was for this He **called you** through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brethren, **stand firm** and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. — 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15*

The two primary examples that Jesus provides as models for Christians to understand what it will be like for them in the Last Days is “*the days of Noah*” (Mt. 24:37-39; Lk. 17:26-27) and “*the days of Lot*”. (Lk. 17:28-30) It is interesting to note pertaining to this discussion that Peter identifies Noah as “*a preacher of righteousness*” (2 Pe. 2:5) and Lot as “*righteous*” (2 Pe. 2:7), qualities they maintained to the very end in spite of the increasingly dark spiritual environment leading up to God’s judgment. By the end, no one would listen to either one in their day, but it was not because of any change taking place within Noah or Lot. In fact, there is a particular parallel in Peter’s further description of Lot’s environment:

*⁷and if He rescued righteous Lot, **oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men** ⁸(for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt **his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds**), — 2 Peter 2:7-8*

Both of these models prefigure on a smaller scale that which Paul describes will ultimately take place on a worldwide scale with the Antichrist when he is no longer restrained. It is a change for the worst which comes upon the unsaved while the saved continue in the character of Noah and Lot regardless of the dwindling numbers on their side. That very spiritual change in the unsaved will naturally torment our own soul as we still have the personal assurance of salvation while witnessing how further and further towards hell they slide. But Peter also adds that God “*made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter...*” (2 Pe. 2:6) This is what is reinforced by Paul’s follow-on instructions to believers to “*stand firm*”. Christians are supposed to live as biblical Christians to the very end, which seems incompatible with assertions that the Church is no longer united and becomes disorganized as that asserts that something has changed

in believers. A time will come when the message will no longer be received, but Holy Spirit-directed lives will endure and be faithful to the very end.

Because the Holy Spirit has worked differently during various times in history, I can accept that the best candidate for “*he who restrains*” is the Holy Spirit, but I’m not convinced that this parallels the embryonic state of Christianity as it existed among a relatively few between the Resurrection and Pentecost. Rather, that which the text is addressing is hyper-focused on a change coming for **non**-believers, and followed up with a reminder from Paul for believers of God’s calling, sanctification, and exhortation to “*stand firm*”.

When the Antichrist finally reveals himself in a self-deifying public display and issues a death sentence for all who do not worship him and his image nor take his mark, this passage seems logical to me in that his followers have abandoned their chance for salvation in Christ by choosing instead to worship and follow Antichrist. It is only natural that in such an environment an unprecedented spiritual change takes place in the world and that Christians will have to maintain that which has already been given to us:

*“But the one who **endures to the end**, he will be saved. — Matthew 24:13*

*“You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has **endured to the end** who will be saved. — Matthew 10:22*

*“And **they overcame him** because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death. — Revelation 12:11*

*Blessed and holy is the one who **has a part in the first resurrection**; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. — Revelation 20:6*

The Church will certainly be under direct, worldwide attack like never before, but will the Bride of Christ revert to a disorganized if not unempowered embryonic state? This seems to contradict Jesus’ instructions in the Olivet Discourse when we are in the midst of this time when all have turned against us:

*¹³“It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; ¹⁵for I will give you utterance and wisdom which **none of your opponents** will be able to resist or refute. — Luke 21:13-15*

Again, the changes specified in 2 Thessalonians 2 are what take place among the unsaved while the saved continue to operate according to the Holy Spirit even while it continues to get spiritually darker and darker in the world at large and even attaining to that time when Jesus predicted spiritual night will fall. This all results in consequences which are far different for the unsaved than the saved.

A Parallel Alignment

Consider how Satan's 3-1/2 year ministry counterfeits Christ's 3-1/2 year ministry, and perhaps this will help us understand the short-term change in the working of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual environment of that final half of Daniel's 70th Week. The very first day of Christ's ministry is inaugurated by His baptism by John the Baptist when affirmations by God the Father and God the Holy Spirit testify to the deity of God the Son.

*Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, and **the Holy Spirit descended** upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and **a voice came out of heaven**, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased." — Luke 3:21-22*

This more humble event which took place largely out of the public eye without publicity or fanfare has a satanic counterfeit, embellished in the way that the world wants to see such things. The Abomination of Desolation (the first day of Antichrist's final 3-1/2 years) is something which first takes place in the most advertised and hyped fashion so as to affix the whole world's attention on what takes place. (Notice how Jerusalem and issues concerning the Temple Mount where this will take place are always headline news and never out of the whole world's view even at present.) First of all, it takes place as part of a very large military action which forcibly takes both the Temple and Jerusalem:

*"Forces from him will arise, desecrate the sanctuary fortress, and do away with the regular sacrifice. And **they will set up the abomination of desolation**. — Daniel 11:31*

*"But **when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies**, then recognize that her desolation is near. — Luke 21:20*

Whereas he first appears as a pre-counterfeit of the Messiah on the white horse, and supporting Scripture indicates his initial agenda will be to foster a false peace, the Abomination of Desolation is the tipping point when Antichrist openly reveals his true self and intentions in the kind of public act of self-deification on a worldwide scale which Nebuchadnezzar effected in his day.

*"Then the king will do as he pleases, and **he will exalt and magnify himself above every god** and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done. — Daniel 11:36*

*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, 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**. — 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4*

This final figure will even create an image of himself in the same manner as Nebuchadnezzar but on a worldwide platform:

*And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to **make an image to the beast** who had the wound of the sword and has come to life. And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause **as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed**. — Revelation 13:14-15*

And probably most importantly, the Abomination of Desolation at the midway point of Daniel's final week of years escalates to that phase designated as "a great tribulation" when the entire world, regardless of their chosen religion or affiliation, will be placed under sentence of death if they do not worship Satan through the beast and his image and so swear by taking his mark.

*"For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. **Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved**; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. — Matthew 24:21-22*

The greater reason for a change in the working of the Holy Spirit is that this is an unprecedented time when Satan is thrown down to earth and given the same amount of time as Christ's earthly ministry which led to life, and instead embarks to fulfill his agenda of leading as many as possible to death. The environment of the First Coming when Christ preached the good news is starkly contrasted to the environment of the coming of the False Christ who fosters lawlessness and destruction. This final 3-1/2 years is specified as "the activity of Satan".

This may go a long way toward explaining why the removal of this restraint has much more to do with a change in the working of the Holy Spirit as He withdraws from the worldly unsaved in a transition to give non-believers over not just to spiritual deception, but a total and pervasive "deluding influence". (2 Th. 2:11) Instead of some kind of "super revival" espoused by many in the Pre-Trib camp, the removal of the Church comes at the height of the entire unsaved world being completely given over to their false beliefs because "they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (2 Th. 2:10), "they will believe what is false" (2 Th. 2:11), and will be judged because "they took pleasure in wickedness". (2 Th. 2:12) This certainly suggests a change away from the Holy Spirit's working to "convict the world". However, it's important to again note that this is not a change in the way He works in the **saved** but designated in these passages as applied exclusively to the **unsaved**.

So What Do I Do With This?

Not to be too snarky about it, but so what? What am I supposed to do with this? When this point on God's prophetic timeline is finally fulfilled, will I even understand that something just took place at the hand of Michael or the Holy Spirit? And how do I act on this?

This borderline sarcastic assertion is actually the more important question we need to ask concerning discussions of who is or isn't "**he who restrains**". I'm not saying there are portions of God's Word which are unimportant and can be ignored— this was provided to us for a reason, and that reason may not be for the sole purpose of providing specific

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information or a warning about an End Times event. Perhaps this is something divinely designed to motivate our approach and devotion to Scripture overall, an impetus to dig deeper.

Not every single thing articulated in God's Word is provided with an accompanying explanation. For instance, why not tell us what Jesus was writing when they brought to Him the woman caught in adultery?

They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. — John 8:6

Or why even mention something the Apostle John heard in his vision and then specify to suppress it for the rest of us?

When the seven peals of thunder had spoken, I was about to write; and I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up the things which the seven peals of thunder have spoken and do not write them." — Revelation 10:4

Likewise, why refer to this restraining factor as given to the original audience of Paul's epistle, but never unambiguously reveal it for future generations?

Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. — 2 Thessalonians 2:5-6

I would offer that such are not just a test of faith, but an inducement to dig deeper into God's Word. By having to exhaustively examine the rest of Scripture in relation to such mysteries, we become engaged in honing our understanding of the fundamental doctrines and our exegetical approach to handling God's Word. In doing so, it exposes the strengths and weaknesses in our own understanding and methods and the errors especially borne out when in our handling of God's prophetic Word; we just might discover we are corrupting something else related. For instance, it is most interesting to note how often this difference of selecting Michael versus the Holy Spirit parallels a difference in opinion where the general working of the Holy Spirit is concerned among the two respective groups.

While there are certainly exceptions, it is important to note that the majority of proponents of the Pre-Wrath position (at least in America) holding to the restrainer being Michael also strongly subscribe to what is often referred to as Cessationism— that is, that the charismatic gifts of the Spirit ended with the death of the original Apostles and that first generation of believers, and are no longer active now that we have the full canon of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. The majority of advocates for Pre-Tribulationism appear to embrace the alternate belief that all the gifts are still available and active. In other words, this debate over the identity of who restrains might be viewed as a microcosm of the greater disagreement the majority on each side hold when it comes to the regular working of the Holy Spirit to begin with, and one might see that greater conflict as spilling over into this more ancillary debate over the identity of the restrainer.

(Ironically, those whom Pre-Trib call "Cessationists" in turn call their counterparts "Continuationists" to identify those holding to a purported wrong belief that all of the

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charismatic gifts are still active. These labels are often used in a derogatory or at least deferential manner; I employ them as simply explaining the particular theological position each maintains even though they may not self-identify with these terms.)

But the greater point is that the exploration of the identity of “*he who restrains*” almost immediately leads into a much more important examination of one’s pneumatology—that is, the study of the character and working of the Holy Spirit. This little mystery actually results in a more important discussion, and in the grander scheme of things, it would probably be healthier for the Church at large to resolve its differences over the working of the Holy Spirit in general than engaging in a steel cage death match over the identity of the restrainer. Cessationism versus Continuationism is a much more divisive issue than the smaller venue of the question of who restrains, which seems to be a place where they have each brought their respective arguments. This is also why, at times, the “disagreement” over this prophetic milestone turns into a nasty and divisive melee.

In the end, we cannot allow this to become an excuse to end fellowship, much less some kind of litmus test for who is going to heaven or hell. We have no ultimate say in who this figure is, and regardless of our chosen interpretation or variation thereof, will have no choice but to live through and with this event when it happens. The greater lesson that we must take away from this is that there *is* going to be an unprecedented spiritual change triggered by the Abomination of Desolation, a milestone which we will all clearly and unambiguously witness and unmistakably recognize. This parallel global change, regardless of who initiates it, is going to bring upon the unsaved a fundamental and total spiritual realignment. It is the pinnacle culmination for *non*-believers in the final sequence of things:

- **“...the apostasy comes first...”** (2 Th. 2:3) Paul summarizes that which Christ elaborated on in the Olivet Discourse, warning that it all begins with escalating, overlapping waves of deception, persecution and apostasy.
- **“...the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction...”** (2 Th. 2:3) The Antichrist is characterized by his two main features as bringing about both “lawlessness” and “destruction”. These are exactly what those rejecting the truth personally and ultimately experience.
- **“...he takes his place in the temple of God...”** (2 Th. 2:4) The Abomination of Desolation takes place.
- **“...he who now restrains...is taken out of the way.”** (2 Th. 2:7) An unprecedented spiritual change takes place on a global scale.
- **“...whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan...for those who perish...”** (2 Th. 2:9-10) The full brunt of this spiritual seismic shift will be directed at the unsaved. Whereas Christ was sent by God, the counterfeit is sent by Satan.
- **“...God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false...”** (2 Th. 2:11) The birth pangs of deception which characterizes the first half of Daniel’s 70th Week gives way to an inescapable spiritual condition simultaneous to the Abomination of Desolation marking a decided change in what takes place among the unsaved from that point on, which is that short period Scripture calls “*great tribulation*”.

- ***“...in order that they all may be judged...”*** (2 Th. 2:12) As we know from Scripture, one of the primary theological reasons the Church is removed is because we are exempt from the wrath of God’s judgment, which is all that remains for the rest of the final sequence of the eschaton.

The only possible benefit of engaging in the discussion of the restrainer’s identity is in how it might reveal the relative soundness when it comes to our determination of other greater related doctrines and our handling of God’s prophetic Word. It is far more important that we understand this sequence, and in particular prepare in advance for an unprecedented spiritual change regardless of who initiates it. It is certainly beneficial in the way in which it exposes how we handle Scripture overall, but not a basis for the kind of division and disassociation so commonly observed at present among the saved. It is at the least incongruous that the saved should be battling each other over something exclusively affecting the unsaved.

In Him,

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