

# 7. When the Restraining Power is removed

## How Shall We Survive?

How shall we survive the time of the rebellion and the revealing of the man of lawlessness? Who is able to stand firm in the faith under these trying circumstances? Will not even the staunchest believers go under in this cesspool of apostasy and immorality?

In this respect, there are two matters that require our attention. First, God's revelation concerning the millennium, the rebellion, and the man of lawlessness is meant to direct us *away* from ourselves *to* the saving power of Christ and the sustaining grace of the Holy Spirit. We do not have to face all this in our own strength, but in the strength of the Lord. Second, the man of lawlessness and his partner, Satan, do not have free rein to do what they want, when they want. The secret power of lawlessness may already be at work, as Paul writes, "but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way" (2 Thess 2:7). The power of sin and Satan will be restrained until the Lord decides otherwise.

In the whole millennium, God is always completely in control. He guides and directs. He restrains and allows. He strengthens and encourages. This is the basic message of both letters to the Thessalonians. Even if Christ has not yet returned and much must still happen before he comes again, everything is under God's control and running according to his plan. We do not have to worry at all; we have a lot of certainty.

## Chosen from the Beginning

When the apostle Paul writes about the terrible apostasy and the great delusion that are coming, as prelude to divine judgment, he does not want to frighten sincere believers.

Immediately following the verses about the delusion of man and God's condemnation thereof, we find these words: "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess 2:13).

We can stand firm and persevere only because God has *chosen* us. This is his divine decree of election made from the beginning, but manifest in time, also in the time of the great tribulation.

It is noteworthy how we are reminded of our *election* precisely in connection with the tribulation. This election speaks also about the perseverance of the saints. God's teaching about election is not a cold and abstract dogma, but a warm and reassuring reality in the great tribulation. We will persevere because of God's sovereign grace and choice.

## The Certainty of Election

In this context, let me mention another passage about the tribulation where the comfort of our election is brought to the fore. In Matthew 24, which records Christ's words about the end of the age, we learn that "[because] of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold" (Matt 24:12). This refers us to the great rebellion about which Paul also wrote in 2 Thessalonians.

In Matthew 24:24, we find the following: "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible." Again, we have a comforting reference to God's decree of election. What is of immense comfort in the last age is that the elect will be preserved.

Just a few verses earlier in the same chapter of Matthew, we read, "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again" (Matt 24:21). What else could this "distress" be than the great tribulation mentioned by Paul? The Lord adds, "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be shortened" (Matt 24:22).

In both passages, it becomes evident that the elect will not fall away into apostasy or go under in distress, but will be saved. God will even shorten the days for the sake of his chosen children. The church will not be forced to carry more than she can bear. In the great tribulation, there is the certainty of election.

## Chosen to be saved

When Paul has explained to the Thessalonian Christians that they will face a difficult time which will end in the judgment of all the ungodly, he hastens to add a proper word of comfort: “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13).

Paul does not want to cause any believer undue alarm. We are to thank God for his saving grace which stands firm also in the last age. He calls the brothers “loved by the Lord.” And there is only one basis for this love: “because from the beginning God chose you.” Before the world was created, God had chosen his children. The expression “*from* the beginning” goes farther back than “*in* the beginning.” The NIV correctly notes that “election is from eternity.” This is also the Reformed confession. Were it not for this election, as our Lord and the apostle speak about it, no one could stand in the great tribulation. For all believers, this is vital information.

I do not want to start a discourse here on the Biblical teaching of election. But we must note this passage carefully because of its immense bearing on the great tribulation. Notice that Paul writes that God chose his children “to be saved.” The purpose of election is full salvation.

There is no basis for the election mentioned here. Elsewhere, we learn that this basis is always God’s grace. In Ephesians 2:8, we read that the manner in which we are saved is belief in the truth. We are saved by faith, and out of grace. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul also mentions the “sanctifying work of the Spirit” and this even comes first because of the previous emphasis on

apostasy and delusion. Election that is based on grace, evident through faith, is also experienced in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Justification is always visible in sanctification and the two go together.

We must also note 2 Thessalonians 2:14 in this connection: “He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” There is a certain order that becomes evident here. God’s work of salvation goes through justifying faith, worked by faithful preaching, evident in sanctification, and leading to glorification, and all this only *in Christ*. We have here the *outline* of God’s council of salvation that stands even through the great tribulation.

## Restraining the Man of Lawlessness

In 2 Thessalonians 2:6, Paul writes about the man of lawlessness being held back. The verb that is used here means not only to hold *back*, but also to hold *down*. The man of lawlessness is kept under severe restraint and cannot do as he pleases.

This reminds us of the first verses of Revelation 20 where we read that Satan is cast into the Abyss and bound for a thousand years. He cannot deceive the nations anymore. This means that the devil’s sphere of influence and range of operations are restricted. This is part of the *restraining* mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2. Since the two – Satan and the man of lawlessness – are so closely connected, it follows that where the one is bound, the other is also limited.

Paul writes, “And now you know what is holding him back” (2 Thess 2:6). The one who holds back the man of lawlessness can only be the Son of Man, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this connection, Paul writes about “the secret power of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:7). The word “secret” means that this power is not always evident in the same way everywhere. Sometimes, it may creep up on people unawares. We do not always fully see the immediate or long-term consequences of what is happening all around us.

Paul uses the word “secret.” This does not mean that the power of lawlessness is, in itself, hard to detect. On the contrary, it is often quite evident. The word that is translated with “secret” is the word *mysterion* which generally means something that was unknown before, but has now been made known so that we can reckon with it. But it remains an insoluble mystery that people can so hate God who in love created them. How could we who love God ever understand the depth of the hatred against Him?

But we know that this hate exists. God has revealed to us the mystery of lawlessness. It is not a mystery anymore. We know that it is here. We know what it does, how it works, and where it is headed. Paul writes about his own time that the power of lawlessness “is already at work.” In the apostolic time, lawlessness had already begun to manifest itself. And it will only get worse as time goes on.

## Revealed for Destruction

Paul writes about the one who holds it back. This can only be our Lord Jesus Christ. The reason for this “holding back” is so that the kingdom of God may be established and the church gathered. But a time will come when the Restrainer is taken out of the way. In his righteous judgment, God pulls back and lets the man of lawlessness be fully revealed.

This does not mean that Christ is rendered powerless against the man of lawlessness. This man must be revealed so that “the Lord Jesus will overthrow [him] with the breath of his mouth” (2 Thess 2:8). Notice that the glorious title of the Savior is used here: the *Lord* Jesus. Christ remains Lord of all and over all. Christ’s Lordship stands, also when the man of lawless shows himself in his greatest hour of evil.

Notice also that the Lord Jesus will destroy the man of lawlessness simply “with the breath of his mouth.” Christ does not need a massive army or an array of nuclear bombs. He simply breathes and the lawless one is overthrown, tumbling from his self-erected throne. This illustrates the great glory and power of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a power that remains

effective throughout the millennium and, at the end of it, will present itself in the total destruction of the man of lawlessness and Satan.

The man of lawlessness will be fully revealed so that he may also be totally destroyed. Christ meets and defeats his enemies when they are at the peak of their power. Our Savior does not kick his enemies when they are down, but lets them rise to great heights and then brings them down.

## Do Not Underestimate

Having read the above, it may be tempting to regard the revelation of the lawless one as being of little meaning and consequence. This, however, would be a serious and costly mistake.

The apostle refers to this when he writes, “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders...” (2 Thess 2:9).

The man of lawlessness will excel in satanic activity. He is not an easy foe. Behind the man of lawlessness, and working through him, is Satan. In Ephesians 6:12, we read, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

In battling the *man* of lawlessness, we are fighting *spiritual* forces. Perhaps that is why Paul so strongly emphasizes the “sanctifying work of the Spirit” (2 Thess 2:13). Let us never underestimate our sworn enemy.

## Deception in the Spiritual Realm

It is important to note that the apostle does not underestimate the man of lawlessness or speak about him lightly. In 2 Thessalonians 2:9, we read about counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders. There may be a great delusion sent upon mankind by God’s just judgment, but the man of lawlessness and his sponsor, Satan, will also make use of great deception themselves.

This deception will be in the spiritual realm especially, and entice people to gross immorality. We will be faced with miracles, signs, and wonders and these may easily deceive us.

The man of lawlessness will cover himself with a cloak of religion. Secularism and atheism always pretend to be spiritually liberating. Of the man of lawlessness, Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, *proclaiming himself to be God.*”

The man of lawlessness will not be “irreligious” but will promote *false* religion. He will invite us to worship him, just as Satan did in our Lord’s temptations (Matt 4:8-10).

In his discourse about the last days, our Lord Jesus also warned us about the spiritual character of the last enemy who will pretend to be Christ: “At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles...” (Matt 24:23-24).

The last days will be filled with false religion and extreme sectarianism. It will be the final manifestation of the anti-christ. It will be very difficult for the believers to maintain proper discretion and to remain faithful. Many will succumb to the prevailing apostasy.

We are reminded here of the apostle John’s exhortation to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). John also gives us an important directive: “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come into the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the anti-christ, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world” (1 John 4:2-3).

The last question will be like the first: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt 16:13). It will boil down to our confession concerning Christ, our following of him, and our living according to all the commandments of God. This is the case in all of history, but especially at the end.

# Counterfeit

We note that the miracles, signs, and wonders of the man of lawlessness and Satan are called “counterfeit.” Literally, it says “of falsehood or lies” but “counterfeit” is a good translation. The miracles will appear to be real and will offer what seems to be true comfort. They will be hard to distinguish from true miracles. The NIV correctly notes that the word “counterfeit” does not here mean “bogus, but producing false impressions.” “Counterfeit” here means purposely deceptive.

It is usually very difficult to distinguish the real thing from one that is counterfeit. Take the case of money, for example. Bogus bills are easily passed on and many people are fooled. Counterfeiting has always been a major criminal activity throughout time, and counterfeiters are becoming more professional as techniques improve.

It will be hard to distinguish real miracles from counterfeit ones. Perhaps the only way to do this is through much prayer and constant focus on the Word of God. It is not impossible to discover what is or is not counterfeit, but it takes a lot of study, effort, and concentration. The believers will be able to discern between what is true and what is false only by remaining faithful to the Scriptures.

## The exact identity of the man of lawlessness?

Of course, we are all interested in the exact identity of the man of lawlessness. Who is he? We must note that the man of lawlessness is *nowhere* identified in the Bible. To seek out his identity therefore means to engage in speculation.

Some explainers suggest that the man of lawlessness is a single person because the word “man” is singular. They therefore think of a particular person. Others suggest that the man of lawlessness is a collective noun, denoting a united group of persons.

We come across the same difficulty when we read about the anti-christ.

Who is he? Is he just one person or many people bound together in a state or institution?

The apostle John speaks about the anti-christ in both the singular and plural. “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18). If we apply this *mutatis mutandis* to the man of lawlessness, we might also go from the singular to the plural.

Whatever the case may be, it is noteworthy that *the Bible does not identify these persons*. Because of this, we must always be on our watch. As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess 2:15). The less we know, the more we have to be on guard. We walk by faith, not by sight.

## The song of the Millennium

We know enough about the man of lawlessness and the antichrist to determine when and where they manifest themselves. We also know how to combat their influence. But the fact that these two are never identified in the Bible makes us all the more dependent on our Lord Jesus Christ who knows exactly who and what they are and how they will be destroyed. We may never boast of ourselves, but boast only in the Lord. This is a line that is found throughout the Scriptures, and it certainly will be evident in the last age: our hope is only in our God. The great hymn of the church is always: Hallelujah or Soli Deo Gloria, all praise to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The last part of the Bible in this respect does not give us anything new. The people of God have always been taught that their help is (only) in the Name of the Lord. The millennium is the time which makes this abundantly clear one more time. At the end of history, as in the beginning, all praise and honor goes to God. Satan and godless mankind have failed miserably and will have an eternity of condemnation to taste the victory of Christ and his saints.