

The Rapture - Part 17

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My previous articles commenced a series on the rapture of the church. We began with the question, "What is the Rapture?" This question can best be answered by noting ten truths about the rapture from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. In previous articles from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, we saw that the rapture is an important doctrine and not something that can be marginalized or explained away as a secondary doctrine. We also noted that the rapture is an event that is distinct from the Second Advent of Christ. We further observed that the rapture will involve the catching up of every believer to meet the Lord in the air, and that the rapture will involve a reunion between living and deceased Church-Age believers. We then began to examine several more points from 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. We noted that the rapture will be a resurrection, will exempt an entire generation of believers from death, will be an instantaneous event, is a mystery, is an imminent event, and is also a traditional doctrine now being recovered.

We then moved to a second main question, namely, when will the rapture take place relative to the coming seven-year Tribulation period? We offered the contention that believers can develop certainty that they will be raptured before the Tribulation period occurs for at least seven reasons. First, the Tribulation period's purpose concerns Israel rather than the church. Second, there is no reference to the church as being on the earth in Revelation 4–19. Third, the church has been promised an exemption from divine wrath. The fourth reason is that the rapture is an imminent event and only the pretribulation view is in harmony with this doctrine. The fifth reason is that only pretribulationism is in harmony with the New Testament's presentation of the rapture as a comforting event. We now move on to our sixth argument favoring pretribulationism.

The Restrainer

The sixth reason that the rapture will take place before the Tribulation period begins is due to the fact that the Antichrist cannot even come forward until the Holy Spirit's restraining ministry through the church is first removed. A common misunderstanding among prophecy students is that the rapture will begin the Tribulation period. Such a view represents a misunderstanding since the Antichrist's covenant or "peace treaty" with unbelieving Israel furnishes the specific eschatological event that will inaugurate the coming seven-year Tribulation period (Dan. 9:27a). However, 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 indicates that the Antichrist cannot make his debut onto the world stage to enter into this covenant until the Restrainer is first removed. These verses say, "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."

Of course, the pertinent question becomes what or who is the restrainer spoken of in these verses? Many interpretations have been proposed. Some contend that the restrainer was the Roman Empire restraining evil in Paul's day. Yet, Rome is gone and the restraint on the advent of the Antichrist remains.

Others believe that Satan is the restrainer. However, according to these verses, the restrainer is currently acting as a check upon the Antichrist, who will be Satan's man of the hour. Satan will perfectly express himself through this coming Antichrist. Second Thessalonians 2:9 says, "*that is*, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders." If Satan is the restrainer, then why would he currently be opposing his own diabolical program? This option is particularly unlikely given Christ's statement in Matthew 12:25-26, which says, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?" If Satan is currently opposing the coming of the Antichrist, then he is currently weakening his own kingdom by dividing it against itself.

Others have suggested the restrainer is the institution of human government because Romans 13:1-7 explains that government restrains the sinful impulses of people. However, this view also does not hold up under close scrutiny since human government will reach its zenith during the Tribulation period. The Antichrist himself will preside over a one-world government (Dan. 7:23; Rev. 13:7, 16-18). How can human government restrain the advent of the Antichrist when the Antichrist will control the masses through an all-powerful government? Thus, just as human government was incapable of holding back Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-10; 11:1-4), who is a typological prefigurement of the coming Antichrist, human government will similarly be incapable of preventing the coming of the Antichrist.

Still others have suggested that the restrainer is Michael the Archangel. The problem with this view is that Jude 9 tells us that Michael is reluctant to contest Satan, when it says, "But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" Therefore, consistency seems to dictate that Michael would also be unwilling to actively contribute to the present veiling of the Satanically controlled Antichrist.

The best interpretive option is that the restrainer mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 is the Holy Spirit. There are two primary reasons for reaching this conclusion. *First*, the force restraining the Antichrist must be more powerful than Satan. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:9, the Antichrist will be Satan's masterpiece who will be directly controlled and empowered by Satan himself. Thus, the restrainer must be powerful enough to prevent Satan from unleashing the Antichrist onto the world scene until the proper time. Only deity possessing the attribute of omnipotence ("all power") has unlimited power. Certainly the Holy Spirit meets this criterion since He is full deity (Acts 5:3-4).

Second, the Greek participle "restrainer" is neuter in 2 Thessalonians 2:6 and masculine in verse 7. Identifying the restrainer as the Holy Spirit handles well this abrupt transition from the neuter to the masculine gender. The Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma*, which is a neuter noun. Moreover, in the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus identified the Holy Spirit with the masculine personal pronoun "him" or "he." For example, in John 14:17, Christ said, "*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." The Holy Spirit is designated by the personal pronoun "he" in other sections of the same discourse (John 15:26; 16:13-14).

Why then did Paul simply not use the words "Holy Spirit" in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7? In Scripture, it is common for the Holy Spirit to be identified by a particular ministry that He provides. In John 14:17, the Holy Spirit is identified by His ministry of truth. In John 14:26, He is identified by His ministry as a helper. In Romans 8:2, He is identified by His ministry of providing spiritual life. The Holy Spirit has a role in restraining evil in the world (Gen. 6:3). Thus, in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, Paul similarly points out the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit without expressly mentioning the specific name "Holy Spirit."

Another factor to keep in mind is that Paul had already taught the Thessalonians about the subject of prophecy during his initial visit. Thus, in his epistles to the Thessalonians, he simply reviews eschatological topics that they already knew. In 2 Thessalonians 2:5, after describing numerous prophetic subjects, he says, "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?" Given this reality, it would be redundant for Paul to continue employing the term "Holy Spirit" if the Thessalonians had already been well taught on the Spirit's role in the outworking of the prophetic program. Given their prior knowledge base, simply referring to the Spirit by alluding to His prophetic role of restraining the Antichrist would have been sufficient to the Thessalonians for purposes of identification. Exactly how the Holy Spirit holds back the Antichrist and how all of this contributes to the doctrine of pretribulationism will be the subject of the next article in the series.

(To Be Continued...)



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