

The Holy Spirit and the Tribulation

And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may 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. (*2 Thessalonians 2:6-7*)

One of the most compelling, yet often misunderstood, arguments for pretribulationism relates to the Holy Spirit's role to the church and the tribulation period. Most holding to the pre-Trib position believe that 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 refers to the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit through the agency of the Church. Thus, when the church is raptured before the tribulation, that ministry of the Holy Spirit will be removed as well. If this interpretation is correct, then it is a strong argument for pretribulationism.

The Restrainer

Second Thessalonians 2:1-12 discusses a man of lawlessness being held back until a later time. Interpreting the restrainer of evil (2:6) as the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit at work through the body of Christ during the current Church Age, supports pretribulationism. Since "the lawless one" (the beast or Antichrist) cannot be revealed until the Restrainer (the Holy Spirit) is taken away (2:7-8), the tribulation, (called the day of the Lord in this passage), cannot occur until after the church is removed. Of all the rapture positions, only the pre-trib position can be harmonized when we understand that the Restrainer is referring to the Holy Spirit.

I believe the correct interpretation of this passage understands the restrainer to refer to the Holy Spirit as He functions during the present church age through the baptism of the Holy Spirit and indwelling of believers. These are ministries that are unique to the Church Age. Both the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit began on the Day of Pentecost as Acts 2 describes. Therefore, these ministries of the Holy Spirit were not active in this way before the birth of the Church.

The cryptic reference to the Holy Spirit's present work in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 explains the unusual grammar employed in the passage. In verse six "the restrainer" is in the neuter gender (to katecho) while in verse seven "the Restrainer" is masculine (o katecho). The significance of such grammar and how

it relates to the Holy Spirit and the rapture is explained by Dr. Robert Thomas below.

Key to the above scenario is whether the Holy Spirit is the Restrainer. After surveying various interpretations of the passage he concludes:

To one familiar with the Lord Jesus' Upper Room Discourse, as Paul undoubtedly was, fluctuation between neuter and masculine recalls how the Holy Spirit is spoken of. Either gender is appropriate, depending on whether the speaker (or writer) thinks of natural agreement (masc. because of the Spirit's personality) or grammatical (neuter because of the noun *pneuma*; see John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14) . . . This identification of the restrainer with deep roots in church history . . . is most appealing. The special presence of the Spirit as the indweller of saints will terminate abruptly at the parousia as it began abruptly at Pentecost. Once the body of Christ has been caught away to heaven, the Spirit's ministry will revert back to what he did for believers during the OT period . . . His function of restraining evil through the body of Christ (John 16:7-11; 1 John 4:4) will cease similarly to the way he terminated his striving in the days of Noah (Gen. 6:3). At that point the reins will be removed from lawlessness and the Satanically inspired rebellion will begin. It appears that to *katechon* ("what is holding back") was well known at Thessalonica as a title for the Holy Spirit on whom the readers had come to depend in their personal attempts to combat lawlessness (1 Thess. 1:6; 4:8; 5:19; 2 Thess. 2:13).¹

Dr. Gerald Stanton cites six reasons why this passage should be understood to refer to the Holy Spirit's restraining ministry through the church.

1. By mere elimination, the Holy Spirit must be the restrainer. All other possibilities fall short of meeting the requirements of one who is to hold in check the forces of evil until the manifestation of Antichrist. . . .
2. The Wicked One is a personality and his operations include the realm of the spiritual. The restrainer must likewise be a personality and of a spiritual order, to resist the wiles of the Devil and to hold Antichrist in check until the time of his revealing. . . .
3. To achieve all that is to be accomplished, the restrainer must be a member of the Godhead. He must be stronger than the Man of Sin, and stronger than Satan. . . .

4. This present age is in a particular sense the "dispensation of the Spirit," for He works in a way uncommon to other ages as an abiding Presence within the children of God. . . .
5. The work of the Spirit since His advent has included the restraint of evil. The Spirit is God's righteous Agent for the age, and there are many reasons to be grateful for His restraining hand upon this world's iniquity. None but the Lawful One could restrain this world's iniquity. . . .
6. It is not difficult to establish that although the Spirit was not resident on earth during Old Testament days, whatever restraint was exerted was by the Spirit. . . . (Isa. 59:19) . . . The wickedness of Noah's day and the fact that life went on as usual in blindness to impending destruction is used of the Spirit in vivid portrayal of careless and wicked men upon whom Tribulation judgment shall fall. . . .

In light of this Scriptural parallel, it is exceedingly significant that in the days immediately preceding the destruction of the flood, the restraining work of the Spirit is emphasized. . . .²

The Church Age

The Church began on the Day of Pentecost with a visitation of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Acts 2. The Church ends at the rapture with the translation of living saints and the resurrection of those who have died in Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Until the rapture, God is gathering out from the Gentiles a people for His name (Acts 15:14) and combining them with the elect remnant of Israel (Rom. 11:5; Eph. 2:11-22) into one new body called the Church (Eph. 2:11-3:13; Col. 1:24-27). This great task is accomplished by a unique ministry of the Holy Spirit only during the Church Age called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "For by one Spirit were we all [Jewish and Gentile Believers] baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Such a work of the Holy Spirit is only for the Church—the Body of Christ. Therefore, it is not surprising that since the tribulation cannot start until after the Church is completed and taken to heaven in the rapture that the man of lawlessness is restrained through the presence of the Holy Spirit on earth indwelling Church Age Believers. This current work of the Holy Spirit is unique to the church. Dr. John Walvoord explains:

We search the prophetic Scriptures in vain for any reference to baptism of the Spirit except in regard to the church, the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). While, therefore, the Spirit continues a ministry in the world in the tribulation, there is no longer a corporate body of believers knit into one living organism. There is rather a return to national distinctions and fulfillment of national promises in preparation for the millennium.³

Conclusion

Those who do not hold to pretribulationism often mischaracterize our view of the Holy Spirit in the tribulation. They often say that pretribulationists do not believe that the Holy Spirit will be present during the tribulation. This is not what we are saying! We do believe that the Holy Spirit will be present and active during the tribulation. We do believe the Holy Spirit will not be carrying out His present unique ministry related to the Church since the completed body of Christ will be in heaven. Further, we are saying that the Holy Spirit will be present in His transdispensational ministry of bringing the elect of the tribulation to faith in Christ, even though they will not be part of the body of Christ—the Church. The Holy Spirit will also aid Tribulation Believers as they live holy lives unto the Lord. The Holy Spirit will also function to seal and protect the 144,000 Jewish witnesses for their great evangelistic ministry as noted in Revelation 7 and 14 and the two witnesses of Revelation 11.

The Rapture could very well be the greatest evangelistic tool in human history. When millions of people disappear from the face of the earth in a split second of time, all kinds of theories and explanations will surface. But many will remember the warnings of friends and loved ones about the truth of the Rapture. In a moment of time, they will realize what has happened. They have been left behind. God will use this mind-numbing realization to bring them to faith in His Son. The Holy Spirit will be active, as He always has throughout history, to bring the elect to salvation in Christ.

Even though pretribulationists believe that many unique aspects of the current work of the Holy Spirit will cease at the rapture, it is not correct to say that we believe the Holy Spirit will not be present during the tribulation. Just as the Holy Spirit will engage in some ministries during the tribulation, relating to the 144,000 witnesses and the two witnesses, that are not occurring during the current church age, so there will cease certain ministries unique to the church which will enable the man of sin to come onto the stage of history. Maranatha!

By Thomas Ice

Endnotes

1. Robert L. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 324-25.
2. Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept From The Hour*, 4th. ed., (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 99-102
3. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1958), p. 231.