

The Coming of Christ, Part II

Call to Worship: Psalm 149:1-4

Hymn #5 (Supp)- *I Sing the Mighty Power of God*

1st Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4

Hymn #493- *Who is on the Lord's Side?*

2nd Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:5-8

Hymn #579- *Be Still My Soul*

Introduction:

Last week, we made our way into chapter two, where Paul gets into the main purpose of his letter, which is to deal with a dangerous heresy that has begun to infiltrate the church, and which threatened to destroy the foundation of hope and encouragement that Paul had set in place for the suffering Thessalonians. Word was getting around that the Lord Jesus Christ had already returned. And if this were truly the case, then the Thessalonians, who had not been gathered together with Christ and their "asleep" loved ones, and who were still, in fact, being persecuted, must have somehow been left out of the redemptive equation.

And so, Paul encourages them not to be shaken or troubled by the lie that was perpetuating concerning the return of Christ, which had not yet occurred. In fact, two major events had to precede the coming of Christ, neither of which had happened, from the standpoint of the Thessalonians. There was a significant "falling away," which had to take place, whereby a large portion of the church would apostatize and turn away from the truth of the Gospel. And, on the heels of that falling away (indeed, springing out of it), the man of sin would be revealed, and he would reek havoc on the church and the world. This "man of sin" would rise up in the church, stealing God's worship for himself, deceptively showing himself as God, but he is also the "son of perdition," indicating that he is destined for eternal destruction in hell.

This morning, we continue on into verses 5-8, which give us further information about the revealing of this "man of sin." And here, we will be given an additional piece of information, which sheds some light on the timing of his rise to power.

I. The Man of Sin

Continuing on then with his description of the "man of sin," Paul provides us with this additional piece to the puzzle, beginning in verses 5&6:

"Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time."

Here, we find Paul speaking in guarded language as it were, about information that he gave to them when he was among them. His language is such that he wants them to reflect upon something he said directly to them, which he, for some reason does not feel at liberty to express in writing at this time. And so, he says, "Look, I already spoke to you about all of this. And you recall that I told you about the "man of sin," and how something is presently keeping him from rising to power at this very moment. There is something restraining, something preventing Satan from raising up this man of sin in the present, which must first be removed. And in God's timing, what is presently restraining, will indeed be removed, enabling the "man of sin," to come to power in his own time.

The question that is begged here then, brethren, is why doesn't Paul just come out and say what it is that is presently restraining? Why is he speaking in guarded language, telling the Thessalonians to bring to mind what he had told them directly when he was among them? He has no problem reiterating everything else. Well, I believe that verse 7 will provide us with the key, which will help unlock this mystery.

"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."

What Paul exactly is Paul stating here? Well, two things, the second of which, I believe resolves our mystery. When he states "that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work," he means that that which will bring about the falling away is already at work. The tone is already being set; the kettle is on the fire, moving things in the direction of the falling away, which will lead to the rise of the man of sin. However, the man of sin cannot rise up until the one who presently restrains is taken out of the way. While the kettle is heating up; while the stage is being set, the main antagonist cannot come out until someone else is removed. Something...indeed, *someone* is presently blocking his way.

Now, before we consider who I believe that someone is, let me just note why I believe Paul is saying that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. What he means by this is that there are already dangerous heresies, which are intruding upon the gospel and beginning to find

sparks of life in the church. The conception phase for the falling away (for the great apostasy of the church) is already in motion, and it will soon be born and take root in the church. The truth; the true gospel and the precious and critical doctrines associated with it are already under attack by the likes of Gnosticism, legalism, and various heresies surrounding the divine and human natures of Christ. This is what he means by the "mystery of lawlessness" already being at work. What you believe always affects how you live. And when the true doctrines of the gospel are compromised it ultimately leads to lawlessness, contradicting the very purposes of God's plan of redemption. [Consider 1 John 4:2-3; 2:18-23]

Now, what of this "restrainer," who, by divine providence, delays the full blown apostasy and the revealing of the man of sin. The best explanation (in my book), which makes complete sense of why Paul is reluctant to actually state who this restrainer is, is that the restrainer is the Roman emperor. Before the "man of sin," can take a position of significant power in the church, the one who is presently in power politically, must be taken away. The "man of sin," who reigns from within the temple (the church), cannot reign as long as Caesar sits upon the throne of Rome. Clearly, Paul could have stated this directly to the Thessalonians when he was with them. And we can understand why he would point to that private discourse without directly mentioning the Roman emperor in his written letter, which could serve to add a much greater burden of persecution to a church that was already being greatly persecuted. While Paul could have been concerned for his own life, I would like to believe that he was far more concerned for the welfare of the Thessalonians. What if this letter got into the hands of the opposition? How would Rome respond to a doctrine that speaks of the Roman emperor being removed permanently?

Finally, Paul adds, "And then the lawless one (the "man of sin") will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming" (vs. 8). [Note: Some say the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, until gospel completes course]

After the restrainer (the Roman emperor) is removed from power, the lawless one (the "man of sin," who brings lawlessness, contrary to the Christ, who brought righteousness) will then be revealed. But ultimately, he, being the son of perdition, will meet his preordained fate. The Lord Jesus Christ, with whom this lawless one has contended, will consume him with the breath of His mouth, and He will destroy Him with the brightness of His coming. The Word of

Christ will devour Him, and the brightness of Christ's appearance at His bodily return will utterly destroy him.

Next time, Lord willing, we will move into verses 9-12, to consider some final thoughts about the man of sin, and his impact upon all who are deluded by his deceitful schemes. For now, let me just make a few additional comments about what I believe all of this to be addressing, before concluding with a few relevant thoughts and applications.

II. The "Falling Away," the "Man of Sin," and the "Restrainer"

Brethren, while I will avoid jumping into a full fledged defense of my understanding of this text (again, I don't want this to become a multi-week discourse on eschatology), let me give you the short form of what I believe Paul has described here for the Thessalonians. Some 2000 years later, we ought to be able to look back to see if anything can be said about such significant and large scale events. Certainly, the mystery of lawlessness, which was brewing at the time the Apostle Paul had written this letter, has come to some kind of fruition, and the Roman emperors have long been displaced. So, here is my "short form" summary of what I believe Paul has described here.

For almost 300 years, from the time of the Apostles to the time of the reign of Constantine the Great, the church had always suffered persecution of various forms and to various degrees, particularly under the tyrannical reign of the Roman emperors. And then, something absolutely profound and unheard of happened! Constantine the great, who ultimately secured the throne from both the eastern and western empires, had himself claimed to be a Christian. Now, people might debate that, but his edict of 313AD (called the "Decree of Milan") stated something very interesting:

"When we, Constantine and Licinius, Emperors, met at Milan in conference concerning the welfare and security of the realm, we decided that of the things that are to profit to all mankind, the worship of God ought to be our first and chiefest care, and that it was right that Christians and all others should have freedom to follow the kind of religion they favoured; so that the God who dwells in heaven might be propitious to us and to all under our rule. We therefore announce that, notwithstanding any provisions concerning the Christians in our former

instructions, all who choose that religion are to be permitted to continue therein, *without any let (restraint) or hindrance*, and are not to be in any way troubled or molested..." [Quote continues, providing freedom for all religions and especially for Christians to practice their faith publicly and without hindrance]

The former Caesars, by and large, commanded that they themselves should be worshiped as gods. And so, for Constantine to move in this direction, created a watershed moment! And in that moment, a blanket of freedom of religion swept across the Christian world in one large swoop. It was a time of great rejoicing for Christians. But, as we have witnessed here in our own country, often times, such freedoms lead to other problems.

For the first time, a church/state link was formed and it became politically expedient to be a member of the church, and especially a leader in the church. This minimized the importance of true conversion and a wave of heresies began to infiltrate the church, ultimately leading to a great apostasy. Pelagianism (which denies the doctrines of original sin and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit) ran rampant, and a significant portion of the church adopted the heresy of Arianism (which denies the deity of Christ) before the fourth century was even breached! The church was full of goats and the gospel had been all but snuffed out.

What made matters more interesting was that Constantine had moved his seat of power out of Rome and into Byzantium (Greece), which he changed to Constantinople, after his own name (this is modern day Istanbul, Turkey). All of this, set the stage for what I believe to be the revealing of the "man of sin." The Roman Empire ultimately fell in 476AD, which led to the rise and power of the Pope. And in 590AD, the first, official, universal Pope, Pope "Gregory the Great" took his seat on the throne. Never, in all of history, has there ever been a darker time, from within the church, where nearly the entire church had collapsed into apostasy, than in the time the Church of Rome had taken such power. And for one thousand years, until the time of the Reformation, the Pope reigned over both the spiritual and political realms, robbing God of His glory, issuing all manner of heretical teachings, contradicting virtually every aspect of Gospel truth, claiming all manner of signs and wonders and powers to support their cause...etc. The Pope himself was called, "Our Lord God the Pope," and he and his underlings had countered the Trinity in every respect of word and practice.

At the time of the Reformation, this beast was wounded by a revival and proclamation of the true gospel (the breath of Christ's mouth), and his power was significantly reduced. However, I believe that he will rise again, to be utterly destroyed by the glory of Christ's presence, when He returns.

Remember, we saw last week that the "man of sin" was someone who would be "revealed/exposed" on the heels of the great apostasy, and this morning we have seen, that that would take place when the restrainer was removed. Our London Baptist confession of 1689, and the Westminster Confession of Faith, state the following, as one of those truths, which are most dearly believed among us (remember, there is much else to believe doctrinally that is not necessarily essential for the faith, differences being allowed among us, but for the Reformers and the Puritans, this was one of those critical doctrines, upon which all agreed):

In chapter 26 of our confession, it states, "The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner; neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of His coming."

Brethren, in the present day, the Roman Catholic Church is still documented to be the largest church, with a membership of 1.27 billion deceived souls worldwide! [ex: Roman Catholic funerals; the Pope turned over the whole order of the church from within]

III. Closing Thoughts and Applications

Having worked through our main text for this morning, brethren, let us then conclude our time by considering three closing thoughts and applications:

1) Let us be warned about the danger and subtlety of apostasy. The devil and his minions are more than willing to invest in future generations before bringing a church down. Apostasy is generally not something that happens overnight. There is generally a gradual drift, which moves further and further away, until the gospel itself is lost altogether.

Recall our Lord's warnings to the seven churches of Asia (in Revelation) as He walked among them, the lampstands. And where are those churches today? They are overrun by the demonic influences of Islam. Brethren, if we are regressing spiritually, our children will generally carry that regression out further and further. We ought to wonder what GRBC of Merrick will look like one hundred years from now, if we consider our present course. What does our corporate prayer look like? How do we view and honor the Lord's Day? What of our zeal for the lost and our zeal and commitment to following Christ and building His church?

2) Let our understanding of the "man of sin's" God-given label of "Son of Perdition" remind us of the glorious sovereignty of God over all things! Yes, the man of sin reeks havoc, but he is also destined for destruction and he cannot ultimately harm the true sheep of Christ. All for whom Christ died will prevail! They must! We know the end of the story! We know all that the Lamb has secured in and by His death and resurrection! We know who, alone, has opened the scrolls of Revelation, assuring us of the full and complete success of His glorious plan of redemption. And so, yes we fight, and yes we maintain spiritual sobriety, but we do so with confidence and joy, knowing full well that Christ wins and the man of sin himself is also the son of perdition.

3) Let us make every attempt to rescue those who are still under the deception of the Roman Catholic Church, by graciously, tenderly and lovingly living out and preaching the Gospel of power to them. They have a works gospel and they are trapped in a cage of man made mechanical traditions, which can do nothing to sanctify the individual who is caught up therein. They need a living gospel, with a living hope, grounded in the true and living God, with a faith fixed on Christ alone, by grace alone, in accordance with the authority of the Scriptures alone, to the ultimate glory of God alone!

Let us be about rescuing them, never looking down on them, as those who are yet in their sins, caught in the deception of a hellish pope, and anti-Christ, man made traditions. [Rome's doctrines are as far from the truth as the east is from the west!]

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25