

Identifying the Restrainer

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. 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;

(2 Thess 2:3–8)

The Challenge:

“These two verses (2 Thess 2:6-7) are among the most problematic texts in the whole of the Pauline corpus. They presuppose knowledge to which we do not have access, no fully convincing parallels have ever been suggested, and, beyond the likelihood that the material derives from the mythical world of apocalypticism, no one has put forward a satisfactory background for the verses.”

—Charles A. Wanamaker, New International Greek Testament Commentary

“the bottom line here, on this particular point, is that there is so much difficulty in identifying this restrainer—there are twelve to fifteen different views—that we can’t really build anything on it.”

—Darrell L. Bock

- **Human Government**
- **The Grace of the Holy Spirit**
- **Paul the Apostle**
- **The Will of God**
- **Michael the Archangel**
- **Satan**

Interpretations of the Early Church

“There is also another, even greater, obligation for us to pray for the emperors; yes, even for the continuance of the empire in general and for Roman interests. We realize that the tremendous force which is hanging over the whole world, and the very end of the world with its threat of dreadful afflictions, is arrested for a time by the continued existence of the Roman Empire. This event we have no desire to experience and, in praying that it may be deferred, we favor the continuance of Rome.”

—Tertullian, Apology 32.29

“What obstacle is there but the Roman state, the falling away of which, by being scattered into ten kingdoms, shall introduce Antichrist upon (its own ruins)?”
—Tertullian, “On the Resurrection of the Flesh” (24)

“What then is it that withholdeth, that is, hindereth him from being revealed? Some indeed say, the grace of the Spirit, but others the Roman empire, to whom I most of all accede. Wherefore? Because if he meant to say the Spirit, he would not have spoken obscurely, but plainly... But because he said this of the Roman empire, he naturally glanced at it, and speaks covertly and darkly. For he did not wish to bring upon himself superfluous enmities, and useless dangers... And he has well said, “the mystery”; that is, it worketh not openly... So indeed he also says here. “Only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way,” that is, when the Roman empire is taken out of the way, then he shall come. And naturally. For as long as the fear of this empire lasts, no one will willingly exalt himself, but when that is dissolved, he will attack the anarchy, and endeavor to seize upon the government both of man and of God.”

—John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians”

“Indeed, the God of the universe has decreed that this figure shall himself appear during the time of consummation, and thus it is God’s own decree that actually detains him until that appearance.”

— Theodoret of Cyr, 2 Thessalonians

Grammatical Considerations

6 And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be

kai oidate to katechon nyn eis en heautou tō kairō auton

revealed .

to apokalyphthēnai

7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains *will do*

gar to mystērion tēs anomias ēdē energeitai monon ho arti katechōn

so until he is taken out of the way.

heōs genētai ek mesou

Human Government

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit's Work in the Church

A number of people have suggested the restrainer might be the Holy Spirit indwelling the church. And in this view, we would have perhaps a reference to the rapture; it's only when the church is taken out of the world with the Spirit's work in the church that the ultimate evil will be unleashed. And this could imply obviously a pre or midtribulational rapture. As the church is taken out of the world, its positive influence through the Spirit is removed, and at that point, the terrible events of the tribulation unfold. That, however, is an unusual interpretation of the language of "restrainer." If Paul meant the Spirit, why didn't he say "Spirit"? Furthermore, even if he means the Spirit, there is nothing in the context to suggest it's the Holy Spirit only as indwelling the church.

—Darrell L. Bock, Perspectives on Eschatology: Five Views on the Millennium, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017).

Angelic Figure or Principality

Angelic Figure

Other people think it might refer to some angelic figures, such as, for instance, the archangel Michael, who seems to have this role elsewhere, going back to the book of Daniel, for instance—the view that I might slightly prefer.

—Darrell L. Bock, Perspectives on Eschatology: Five Views on the Millennium, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017).

Michael the Archangel

Dan. 12:1–2 tells us that before the final resurrection at the eschaton the archangel Michael will arise. Michael is called “the great prince who protects your people.” He will arise because there will be a time of unparalleled great distress. In widely diverse early Jewish and Jewish Christian literature Michael is seen as the most important archangel (1 Enoch 24.6; Testament of Isaac 2.1; Ascension of Isaiah 3:15–16; 1QM 17.7; 3 Enoch 17.3).

—Ben Witherington III, 1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary

Satan

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. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. 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. For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time.”

(Revelation 12:7–12)

“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. Now I have come to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision pertains to the days yet future.”

(Daniel 10:13–14)

<https://mysteryofisrael.org/who-is-the-restrainer-in-2-thessalonians-2/>