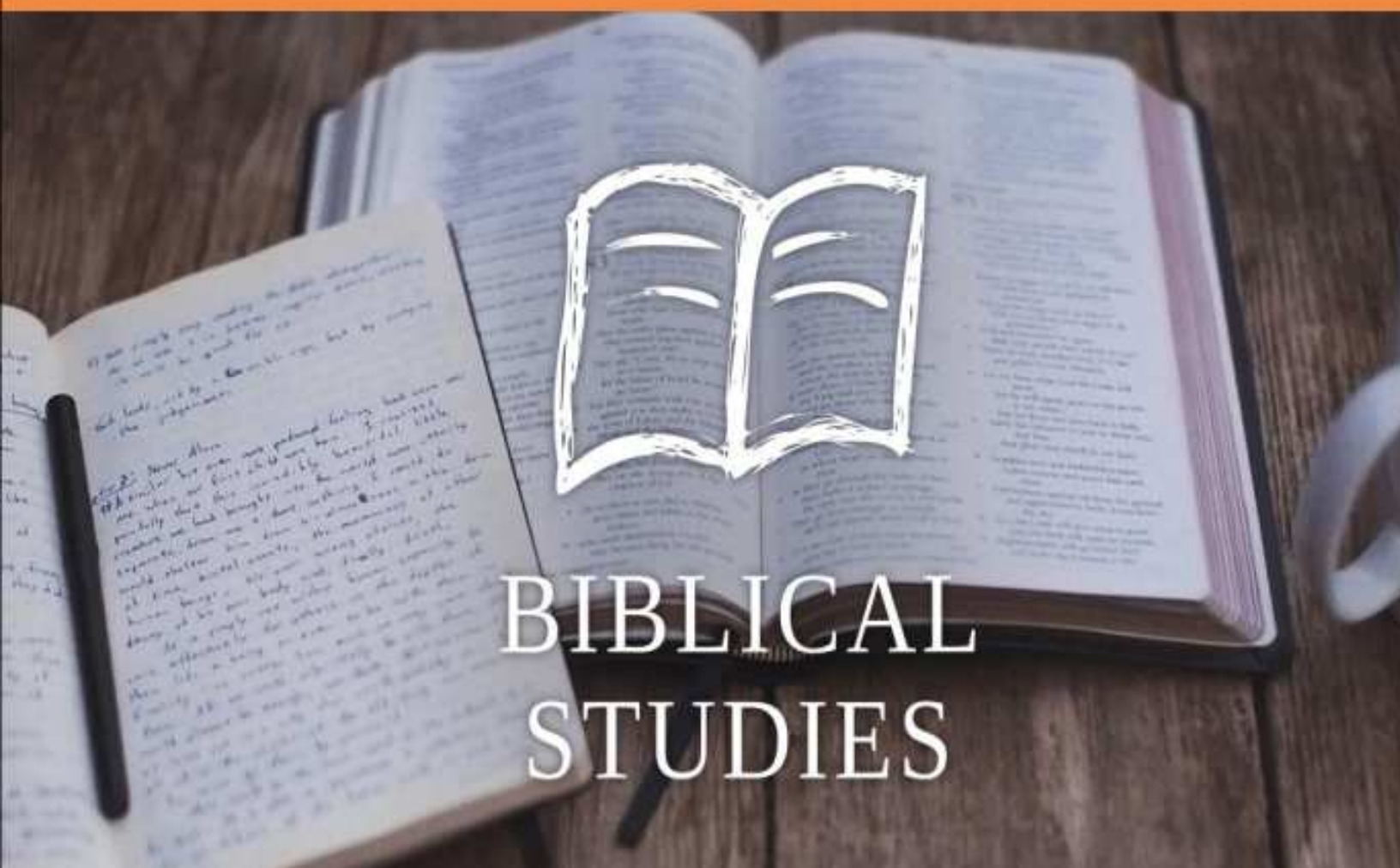


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## THE RESTRAINT AND RESTRAINER IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2.6-7

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### Abstract

The passage in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 revolves around the mysterious concept of restraint and the restrainer, contributing to the eschatological discourse within the New Testament. The verses suggest a divine force at work, temporarily holding back the revelation of the Antichrist and the culmination of apocalyptic events. The identity of the restrainer remains ambiguous, prompting theological debates and interpretations throughout Christian history. Students of biblical prophecy have differing views over the identity of “he who restrains” and “that which restrains” in 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7. The purpose of this paper was to identify that which restrains and he who restrains in the passage of 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7. The methodology for this study is biblical exegesis. This is the process of drawing out the given meaning from the text. It was found out that “he who restrains” in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7 was God and “that which restrains” was the preaching of the gospel of our Lord Jesus to all nations. It was recommended that the passage of Isaiah 66 should be considered to understand who and what is restraining in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7.

**Keywords:** Restrains, Thessalonians, katechon, Eschatology, Antichrist

### Introduction

Students of biblical prophecy have differing views over the identity of “he who restrains” and “that which restrains” in 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7. This study shall undertake the exegesis of the passage. But to address verses 6-7, it is important to consider the pericope which is verses 1-8. Second Thessalonians 2:1-8 is an instruction by Paul on the second coming of Christ. The text is laid out as follows:

*Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, <sup>2</sup> not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. <sup>3</sup> Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to*

*tell you these things? <sup>6</sup> And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. <sup>7</sup> For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. <sup>8</sup> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. (NIV)*

In verse 2, reference is made to a situation of confusion among the Thessalonians. The exhortation with which they are addressed implies that what they had been warned against was already a reality. They were shaken in mind and alarmed concerning the Day of the Lord. The reason for this confusion is described in the words “as if the day of the Lord has already come” (v. 2c). The Thessalonians were therefore warned against what Paul considers a misconception of the Day of the Lord. Paul assured the church that the Day of the Lord had not yet begun. He argued that the Day of the Lord is a future event.

In 2 Thessalonians 2.3, Paul explicitly states that the Day of the Lord cannot come before the rebellion along



with the revelation of the man of ungodliness. "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction." This means, according to God's plan, the day of the Lord and the accompanying judgment will not start until two things happen: First, a rebellion must occur and then the man of lawlessness has to be revealed.

Verse 4 characterizes the Man of Ungodliness as an eschatological enemy of God. The man of lawlessness "opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship." This seems to be taken directly from Daniel 11:36: "And the king shall do according to his will; he shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods." The author of Thessalonians then adds a new element: "he will take his place in the temple and proclaim himself as a god."

Verse 5 is a reference of Paul to what he taught the Thessalonians when he was still among them. Apparently, Paul had instructed the Thessalonians on this evil, eschatological opponent. The "these things" must refer to the things previously mentioned: the rebellion and the revelation of the Man of Ungodliness as well as his characterization. At least this is the sense of verse five.

But then Paul mentions that there is something or someone that is currently keeping the evil in check: "And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. The secret power of lawlessness is already at work, but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed" (verses 6–8). Paul does not specifically identify what or who the restrainer is but says that the Thessalonians already knew about the restrainer. But while Paul and the Thessalonian Christians knew about the restrainer, Christians today are put in the dark as to what he/it is.

The Greek word used for the restrainer is *katechon*. The restrainer is referred to both in the neuter gender and the masculine gender. The difficulty of who or what is this restrainer is captured by Roger D. Aus as follows: "One of the most puzzling problems in the New Testament, even before the advent of the modern critical study of the Bible, has been the interpretation of the phrases *to katechon* and *ho katechon* in 2 Thess 2:6-7" (537). In the same way, L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte says, "In these verses an obscure power or being is introduced and referred to as, *to katechon* (v. 6) and *ho katechon* (v. 7). Several problems make the interpretation of the two verses mentioned extremely difficult" (138). As a result of the difficulty involved in identifying the restrainer, many scholars have made some speculations. The restrainer has been variously identified as:

- (1) The Roman emperor/empire or a particular human ruler
- (2) Paul
- (3) Satan's rebellion
- (4) God
- (5) The Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>

Gary DeMar holds that this passage likely refers to the Roman Empire, while the restrainer might refer to King Agrippa, who stopped further killing of Christians after the death of James and tried to stop the Jewish War in AD 66 (303-306). There is a considerable problem with this suggestion. First, the books of Daniel and Revelation see human government as pushing for the rise of lawlessness and not restraining him. Colin Nicholl holds that "given that the *ἀνομία* (lawlessness) is rebellion not against human authority, but rather against God's revelation, it is difficult to understand exactly how or why human government or rulers would restrain the *ἀνομία* and why the removal of such a restrainer would permit the rebel's revelation" (31). Similarly, Peerbolte writes, "If the *katechon* or *katechoon* refers to the Roman Empire and Emperor, why then is there no trace whatsoever of this view of the Empire as a withholder of evil either in the rest of this passage or in other contemporary Christian

<sup>1</sup> cf. <https://www.gotquestions.org/restrainer.html> par. 3



passages? (142). The only biblical writing contemporary to 2 Thessalonians in which the Roman Empire and Emperor play a part is the Book of Revelation, but John did not portray the Empire as the withholder of evil. Rather, the Book of Revelation describes the Roman Empire and its Emperor as opponents of Christ and the Christians. Since Christian writings show that the Roman Empire has been an opponent of Christ and the church, it means that the identification of the restrainer as the Roman Empire is not correct. Secondly, since the Roman Empire fell in the fifth century A.D., the “restrainer” would have no meaning for the Christians today. Thomas writes, “Elimination of this solution is sealed when we remember that the Roman Empire has long since ceased to exist, and the appearance of Christ or the lawless one has yet to take place” (324).

The second option that Paul is the restrainer would not work because it is unclear whether his death would result in the revelation of the lawless one. The third view is that Satan is the one holding back the man of lawlessness from coming into power until the time is ready (cf. Dixon, 445-449). This view that the restrainer is Satan is implausible. The fact is that Satan is the one working against the plan of God. For that reason, he cannot be the one holding back the man of lawlessness. The fourth view is that, “that which restrains is God.” This view, however, is eliminated because God cannot be spoken of as being removed from the scene. This is because God is in control of everything. The fifth view is that the Holy Spirit is the restrainer. Those who hold this view believe that the Holy Spirit being removed, would lead to utter lawlessness. Thomas writes, “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 to what he did for believers during the OT period” (424-425). To say however, that the Holy Spirit is “that which restrains” seems not tenable. This is because the Holy Spirit is to abide with believers until the second coming of Christ. The New Testament teaches that the second of Christ will mark the end of the world.

What then is the restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7? Because of the great number of interpretation

possibilities in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2, most commentators simply present the major alternative solutions and let the reader choose between them, presuming that no probable answers can be reached. But even if we cannot be so certain, is there no way out for the understanding of “that which restrains” in 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7?

A careful look at the passage of 2 Thessalonians 2.1-7 shows that the author used some passages of the Old Testament as part of the background of his thought. This possibility can be affirmed by the fact that the author used part of Old Testament passages in chapter one. Psalm 88 (89) is likely employed both in 2 Thessalonians 1:10 and in 2:3. Further, Isaiah 66 which describes the theophany of the Lord seems to have influenced the presentation of Jesus’ final appearance in 2 Thessalonians 1 in a major way. The passage of Isaiah 66 seems to help explain who or what is restraining the coming of the Lord.

Rogers D. Aus is strongly of the view that Isaiah 66 is the background to the statement of 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7. This is because in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition, “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Aus holds that the Greek for “opposes” is the “participle *ho antikeimenos*. This is most probably borrowed from the phrase *tois antikeimenos* of Isaiah 66:6, referring to the “enemies” of God, those “opposed” to him” (539). As in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, in Isaiah 66.6 the opponents are also associated with the temple.

It seems the temple in 2 Thessalonians 2.4 has been inserted into an allusion to Ezekiel 28.2 to fit the author’s need. The Ezekiel text speaks of the seat of the gods as being in the heart of the seas, not in the Jerusalem temple. For that reason, the author of Thessalonians saw it fit to continue his borrowing from the same passage of Isaiah and to employ its word for temple *naon* and not a different Greek expression such as *hieron*. The phraseology of righteousness and judgment in Isaiah 66.6 is also used in 2 Thessalonians 1.6.



Aus holds that "if the "son" of Isaiah 66:7, interpreted in the targum as the "king," is for the author of 2 Thessalonians the messianic King, as is the case in several Jewish and Jewish-Christian sources, the author may have employed phrases from the adjacent verse (66:6) partially because of their *closeness or proximity* to this term" (539).

It can be seen that the eschatological judgment theophany of Isaiah 66:15-16, is employed in the judgment theophany of 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10. A fact that the Lord will execute judgment on all flesh (cf. Isa. 66:23). Isaiah 66:18-21 holds that the Lord will gather all nations to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, they will see the glory of God. From the nations which have come to Jerusalem, and which have participated in the judgment of Isaiah 66: 16, the Lord will send survivors to the nations "that have not heard my fame or seen my glory" (v 19). The LXX reads in Isaiah 66:19: "From them I will send [those who are] saved to the nations." Aus writes, "For the Christian reading this Isaiah text, the "saved" would be those who believed in the redemption found in Jesus the Messiah. This is shown, for example, in Paul's use of this same expression in 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 2 Corinthians 2:15. The "saved" or "redeemed" would then be Christian missionaries whom God sends to the nations" (539). As the Gentile survivors in Isaiah were to bring the Jews of the diaspora back to Jerusalem, so it will be that the Christians are to bring souls from all the nations to the Lord.

The passage of Isaiah 66 that is used extensively in 2 Thessalonians chapter one, seems to offer a solution to the meaning of the puzzling phrase "that which is restraining" in 2 Thessalonians 2:6. It is the mission to carry the gospel to all the nations which could be the (neuter) restraining factor of the author of 2 Thessalonians. Aus holds that "It is God's will or plan that the gospel first be carried to all men before the Day of the Lord arrives" (549). This is in accord with the teaching of Jesus that the end will not come until the gospel is being preached to the end of the world.

To help us understand more the meaning of "that which restrains" we need to know that which is being restrained in 2 Thessalonians 2.6. Is it the revelation of the man of lawlessness or the second coming of our

Lord? The translation of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) implies the man of lawlessness. This meaning will not fit the thought of the apostle Paul because 2 Thessalonians 2.7 says, "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains [it will do so/let him do so] until it [the mystery] is removed/disappears." The teaching of Jesus shows that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Matthew 24.4-14 says,

And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. <sup>5</sup> For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. <sup>6</sup> And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all *these things* must come to pass, but the end is not yet. <sup>7</sup> For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. <sup>8</sup> "All these *are* the beginning of sorrows. <sup>9</sup> "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. <sup>10</sup> "And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. <sup>11</sup> "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. <sup>12</sup> "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. <sup>13</sup> "But he who endures to the end shall be saved.

All of these descriptions show that the lawless one is already revealed. In Matthew 24.14 Jesus says that his second coming will not happen until the gospel is being preached to all nations "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." This means, that which is being restrained is the second coming of Christ. And the preaching of the gospel is "that which restrains."

Since "that which restrains," is the preaching of the gospel to all nations, "he who restrains" then should be God. This means that which restrains and he who restrains are integrally related. "That which restrains" is the will or plan of God that the gospel be proclaimed to all men, and "he who restrains" is God himself. The author of 2 Thessalonians writes that the addressees know what is restraining Jesus' return (2 Thess. 2.5). Even if they had not been instructed as to the exact



identity of “he who restrains,” they could have understood it in the Greek text by reasoning that if they are already acquainted with the neuter “that which restrains” that is, God's plan that all men be saved, the masculine form “he who restrains” would be directly related to this, that is, the restrainer is God.

A final reason from the context for interpreting “he who restrains” in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 as God is the further development of the author's argument in this section of the chapter. The text states that “those who are to perish” will be deceived at and/ or through the coming of the lawless one (2:10). Because of this, their refusal to love the truth and thus be saved, “God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2:11-12).

The mystery of lawlessness is to be active until its mysterious aspect is removed or disappears. That is, evil or lawlessness has not yet reached its peak. Only then, when it is most intense and apparent to all, will God cease his restraining, then the Messiah will come, and the decisive battle between the lawless one and the Lord Jesus will take place. This accords with the suggestion that the addressees of 2 Thessalonians conceive of their intense sufferings as the messianic woes, part of the coming of the Day of the Lord. The author, however, states that first certain things must happen before the Day of the Lord will arrive (2:2). Evil and suffering will become even more intense (2:3-7). Only then will the final time have come.

### Findings and Recommendations

Based on this study, it was found out that “he who restrains” in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7 was God and “that which restrains” was the preaching of the gospel of our Lord Jesus to all nations. It was recommended that the passage of Isaiah 66 should be considered to understand who and what is restraining in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7.

### Conclusion

While the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, the second coming of our Lord is still delayed. But what is it that is holding it up? It is the need for the gospel to be proclaimed to the end of the world. When the gospel is preached to the end of the world, then the

second coming will happen. This means God is depending on the Christians. He wants the Christians to preach the gospel to the lost humanity. They may not all believe, but if they should hear of the gospel then they will not be with any excuse. God does not want any person to be with the excuse that he did not hear of the gospel. The challenge for the Christian now is that into our hands, the gospel is given, and into our hands is given the light. What are we to do with it? Let us haste to carry God's precious message to the lost.

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