

Remembering...In Light Of His Coming

Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

We need to be reminded from time to time that the freedoms we enjoy in our 210-year-old democracy were gained at a very high price. Certain slogans which we hear on occasion remind us of that fact: "Remember the 'Maine'"; "Remember the Alamo"; "Remember Pearl Harbor," etc. As a matter of fact, our most recent slogan could very well be, "Remember the Lady" the Statue of Liberty, and all that she symbolizes.

The Scriptures have many admonishments that Christians remember certain things. For instance, we are exhorted to remember the actions our God has taken in our behalf to reconcile to him and begin to live as he intended us to live; to bring us to where we can truly enjoy the wonderful freedom we have in Christ. But we tend to forget, don't we? That is why Moses exhorted the Israelites to remember the day the Lord delivered them from Egypt, and to remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy. They were to wear tassels on their garments so they would remember all the commandments of the Lord so as to do them and not follow after their own desires.

In the New Testament Jesus found it necessary to remind his disciples of many things. At the Last Supper he said to them, "Remember the words I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecute me, they will persecute you." Another reminder was forthcoming from the angels at the empty tomb following Jesus' resurrection: "He is not here, but has risen," they said to the women. "Remember how he spoke to you while he was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and the third day rise again? And they remembered his words. . . ."

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians is, in many ways, a "reminder" letter. The Thessalonians were no different than anyone else. They too needed to be reminded of spiritual truth which had been imparted to them; truth about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and truth about his second coming in power and glory. They had forgotten details of what they had been taught, and confused the order of some events that were to occur in the future.

This forgetfulness and confusion had upset their peace of mind. That is why Paul wrote in the key opening verses of the second chapter of this letter, "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." Apparently one of those things, "a spirit or a message or a letter," had so confused the Thessalonians they believed the "day of the Lord" had already come, they had missed the gathering of the saints, and they were living in the time of the tribulation. But Paul in chapter 2 lets them know that two events must first occur before these things: the "apostasy" must come first, and the "man of lawlessness" be revealed. As a result, there would be a worldwide political and religious rebellion against God.

The second coming of Christ, therefore, was the area in which the Thessalonians most struggled, and that is why the apostle sought to encourage, instruct and admonish them concerning the events of that second coming. "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, was telling you these things?" he asks in verse 5 of chapter 2. The order of events in the last days, what the book of Daniel calls "the times of the Gentiles," therefore are, first, the apostasy; then, "the man of lawlessness is revealed"; and then, in Paul's words, "he who now restrains" will be removed.

Paul's reminder, of course, was not aimed solely at the Thessalonians. It is of much benefit to us in our own day. We too should seek to remember these important truths in light of Christ's second coming. In the section which we will cover today, verses 6 through 12 of chapter 2, there are three things for Christians to remember

concerning these events. First, remember that

1. The Restraint Will Be Removed 2:6,7

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.

The "man of sin," the antichrist of the books of Daniel, Matthew and Revelation would one day be revealed, according to Paul. The Thessalonians had already been taught these things by the apostle, thus what he is doing here is reminding them. They knew that in the "seventieth week," detailed in the book of Daniel, this "man of sin" would be present in the world, waiting for his cue to enter the stage of human history and fulfill his major role in the final act. When this man stepped on stage, then the world would know his identity by his words and deeds. His goal would be the destruction of a large part of humanity, and worldwide worship of Satan and himself as God.

This "man of sin" who is referred to as the little horn," the ~desolator," and the "willful king" in the book of Daniel, the "abomination of desolation" in Matthew, and the "white horse rider," "the first beast" of the book of Revelation, will be Satan's masterpiece, the counterfeit Messiah. His power and authority will be given him by Satan, and with that power this "man of sin" will exercise an awful tyranny over millions of people by first deceiving and then enslaving them. In Matthew 24, Jesus told his disciples, ". . . there will be a great tribulation [after the antichrist places the "abomination of desolation," an image of himself, in place in the newly-built third temple in Jerusalem] such as the world has never experienced until now, nor ever shall. And unless those days had been shortened no life would have been saved, but for the elect those days shall be cut short."

There are three things we must bear in mind as we look into this passage about the end times: the ~man of sin" will be on stage but not yet revealed; the "mystery of lawlessness" will already have been at work; and something or someone will be at work, restraining him.

Two questions arise from this: what is the "mystery of lawlessness," and who or what is the "restrainer"? When Paul uses the word "mystery," he is referring to information that is outside the realm of unassisted natural apprehension, truth which can only be known in a manner and at a time appointed by God by those who are illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

A study of Scripture reveals there are several mysteries in the New Testament which believers during Old Testament times knew nothing of. There is the "mystery" of godliness: "Christ in you, the hope of glory"; the "mystery" of the church, the "mystery" of the Kingdom of God, all of which were unknown in the Old Testament. But then God began to reveal these things to his prophets and teachers in New Testament times.

And then there is this "mystery of Lawlessness." In the last chapter of his book, Daniel asked the angel to reveal the outcome of the strange dreams and visions he had been granted, saying, "As for me, I heard but could not understand; so I said, 'My Lord, what will be the outcome of these events?' And He said, Go your way Daniel, for these words are concealed and sealed up until the end time." But Paul, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, now moves to demonstrate to the Thessalonians what is behind this "mystery of lawlessness."

This is the spirit that was at work when he and Silas and Timothy were preaching the gospel in the synagogue in Thessalonica and the Jewish "rent--a--mob" attacked them. This is the spin--it that the apostle was referring to when he wrote these words to the Ephesian church: "You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience . . . living in the lusts of the flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath." The apostle again identifies this "mystery of lawlessness" for the Ephesians when he says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places"

Paul is saying that invisible forces of evil blind men's minds and emotions. These forces deceive and lie, and in the end destroy men and women in every generation. What else can explain your children's behavior when they destroy their lives despite all your good advice and counsel to them? Don't be shocked. That is the "mystery of lawlessness" at work. Read the word of God, read secular history and you will find over and over again the same sins of rebellion against God. How many people, even in the body of Christ, have heard the story of the terrible Consequences of David's sins of adultery with Bathsheba and yet they go ahead and involve themselves in adulterous relationships? What is that but the "mystery of lawlessness" at work, the world, the flesh and the devil? The lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life--all that is causing frustration in life, all the anxiety and fear involved in life today, all come from our flesh and our arch enemy, Satan.

The only hope for any of us, of course, is another mystery--the mystery of godliness: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." After I received a nasty phone call last week, I spent several days irritated and agitated. I wanted to become Ron Ritchie in the flesh once more because I know how to handle those things in the flesh. I know how to rip someone's face off when I'm bugged. It's dealt with. I don't have to spend weeks praying and writing letters. That is the "mystery of lawlessness" at work. My struggle was with how to respond in a godly fashion, how to respond righteously. Only Christ at work in me can stop me from responding in the flesh.

"The mystery of sin was at work also among the Thessalonians. And that mystery will continue working in every generation until the day when it will all be focused in the person of one man, "the man of lawlessness." Then the worldwide rebellion of man against his Creator will be manifested in the heart of one man.

The secular mind cannot fathom and indeed does not recognize that there is a "mystery of lawlessness" at work. An article on crime in a May issue of U.S. News and World Report entitled. "A Crime Rise that Stumps the Experts," demonstrates the inadequacies of the expertise of the fleshly mind:

Remember all those experts who predicted that crime, which began falling in 1982, would keep tumbling through this decade if not longer? New crime figures have just sandbagged these forecasters and sent them back to their criminology books.

Major crimes reported to police rose by 4 percent last year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation disclosed on April 24, which may raise tears of a return to the surge of lawbreaking that plagued the nation in the 1960s and 1970s. That violence was blamed mostly on an exploding teenage population. Street crime is a young man's pursuit, and the large numbers of baby--boomers moving through their teen years fitted the model.

Then, crime started edging down--a trend that satisfied two theories at once. Baby--boomers were older, and a campaign for longer prison sentences was taking hold--a policy the Reagan administration and other supporters contend not only keeps criminals off the streets longer but also helps to deter potential lawbreakers. Demographers and get-tough advocates squabbled over which theory deserved the major share of credit.

Now, the forecasts of both camps have gone awry.

The experts sought to use their skills to forecast crime levels, but they were wrong. Don't be hard on them, however. What do they know about the "mystery of lawlessness"? Just last week I heard a man say on the radio, "Who can explain the upsurge in teenage suicide? It is a mystery." Yes indeed, the "mystery of lawlessness," the world, the flesh and the devil--that is what is behind all the evil of the world.

Who or what, then, is the "restrainer"? To restrain means to hold back, to hold in check something or someone. Here Paul uses this word to indicate that something or someone is holding back the "man of lawlessness," the counterfeit Messiah, from coming out on center stage and putting in place his schemes for destroying humanity. There are three common views as to the identity of this "restrainer."

In the first view, many scholars think that in the immediate context the "restrainer" Paul has in view is none other than the heavy hand of the Roman Empire. Today, of course, that empire is no longer with us, so the

same scholars hold that the "restrainer" is God--ordained human government which rewards good and punishes evil. The second view holds that the "restrainer" is the visible, professing church which will succumb under the persecution instituted by the antichrist and bow down to him.

Now the third view. Notice that when Paul first speaks of the "restrainer" he speaks of something that holds him ("the man of sin") back: "And you know What restrains him now. . . ." (verse 6), then in verse 7 the apostle says: "he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way:' I believe the apostle is saying that the "restrainer" is the Holy Spirit working through the church, which, Jesus said, is the "salt and light" of the world.

The Holy Spirit indwells Christians and through them convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. We know that the church is going to be "gathered together to Him" at our Lord's invisible return, just prior to the start of the great tribulation, and then the "man of sin" will be revealed. We also know from Scripture that God the Holy Spirit is omnipresent, but it is possible that his ministry of restraining evil through the church will be removed at the time of the tribulation. On this note, a Christian airline stewardess told me last week that a passenger on her flight said to her, "I hate Christians. They are taking away our rights of sodomy, of abortion, pornography and gay relationships. I'm so mad at them I'd like to get rid of them " Yes, I believe the 'restrainer" is the church of Jesus Christ as directed by the Holy Spirit, which is salt and light in the darkness of the secular world, during the age of the Spirit.

"Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?" Paul asks. Yes, the Thessalonians needed a reminder SO they would not lose sight of what the apostle had taught them while he was with them. And once the "restrainer" is removed, Paul says.

2. Satan Will Be Set Free to Deceive 2:8-10

And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and taring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

The "mystery of lawlessness" will become manifest in the "man of lawlessness:' This man will be "revealed," Paul says. Having been acclaimed a political genius following his solving of the Arab--Israeli conflict (Daniel 11), he will be unmasked during the final 3 3 1/2 years of the tribulation period. He will be exalted as the new world political and religious leader, and he will "exalt himself over every so-called god or object of worship."

Then he will break his covenant with Israel, and put a stop to all sacrifice in the rebuilt temple. He will take his seat in that temple and erect the "abomination of desolation," an image of himself which everyone must worship under pain of death, in accordance with the rules of the new world religion. His activities will be in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all deception and wickedness. He will deceive the nations and blind the minds of men. There will then be worldwide religious persecution against all who refuse to worship him, Jew and Gentile alike, people who know that this man is a false god, a false messiah.

What will be the final end of this 'man of sin"? Isaiah 11 tells us that in the righteous reign of the Branch of Jesse" Jesus the Messiah will enter into history once again and will. according to Scripture, "slay the man of sin with the breath of His mouth." The short but terrible reign of the antichrist will come to an end.

What will happen to those who reject the truth of the gospel'? They will perish "because they did not receive the love of the truth SO as to be saved" (verse 10). They will perish because their unbelief opened them up to the false signs and wonders of the "man of sin." They will perish because they will have suppressed the truth in unrighteousness." They will perish because they "exchanged the truth of God for a lie." They will perish because they did not see fit to acknowledge God or his Son Jesus Christ, the good news of the forgiveness of sin and the gift of life. They will perish because they worshiped the beast and their names were not written in the book of life. They will perish 'because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.'

'Do you not remember that while I was still with you. I was telling you these things?'" Paul asks the Thessalonians. Before the day of the Lord the apostasy must first come, with the "man of sin" working in the background he would not be revealed until the "restrainer" was removed. and then Satan would be free to deceive But in the end Satan and all his followers will be judged Finally, Paul says. remember that I told you,

3. God Will Judge the Wicked 2:11,12

And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

"Because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved, . . . " "for this reason," Paul says, God will do as he has done in the past, he "will send upon them a deluding influence" that they might believe what is false." A "deluding influence" is a divine judgment whereby a power is set in motion which makes people embrace error and are leads them astray (Rom 1) They begin to wander mentally and spiritually, and make errors in judgment in areas of morality.

There are many examples of this occurring in Scripture When Pharaoh hardened his heart (Ex. 7:14), God hardened his heart in return (Ex. 9:12). When the king of Israel rejected God's prophets, then God permitted him to be deceived by means of a lying spirit in the mouths of other prophets (II Chron. 18:22). When men practice impurity, God gives them up in the lusts of their hearts to Impurity. That is how it will be in the end times. God will send a deluding power into the hearts of those who stubbornly refuse to accept his redemptive truth. They will believe that the "man of sin" is God, and they will delight in wickedness.

The Lord God who is filled with love, mercy and grace is still, as Scripture says, the "Judge of all the earth," and his justice must be served. If people will not place their faith in his Son Jesus Christ, then they will suffer the wrath of his judgment, for they have no covering. The blood of Jesus Christ is what covers Christians from the wrath of God. They do not have any fear of under--going the judgment of God, or being banished forever from his presence, because they have believed on his Son and are thus covered. Those who do not believe, on the other hand, those for whom evil has become good will be left naked and without cover on the terrible day of God's judgment.

So Paul has been setting for the Thessalonians the order of events, as it were, of the end times, reminding those who had forgotten of what he had already imparted to them. He was writing, as he says, "that you may not be shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." The "apostasy," he says, must come first, and then the "man of lawlessness" revealed. Meanwhile, the persecution and affliction they were suffering was part of what he termed the "mystery of lawlessness" at work. But once the "restrainer" is taken out of the way, the 'day of the Lord" will be close at hand, the day when Jesus will return in judgment and set up his divine kingdom on earth.

Paul's message to the Thessalonians has much application for us today. Let us not be quickly shaken or disturbed. Ask God to teach you how to live in this community, to see what he is doing and how he can use you to be salt and light until he comes again God is faithful. We know what is happening and we know what is going to happen. so there is nothing to fear. He has set in motion a plan of redemption for all who will place their faith in Jesus Christ.

I hope you will come to the place where you will see life as God wants you to see it. A girl came by my house yesterday and said to me, "I sat next to a woman in a restaurant last week. I knew what you would do but I didn't want to because it was my day off! But I did talk to her because I knew it was right to do so. I know that God loves her, that she is valuable to him, and I shared Jesus Christ with her." That's all God wants. That's all you want--the courage, the tenacity to see things from God's point of view. You get that by praying for it. Ask God to open your heart and your eyes and get rid of this idea of trying to be safe and comfortable. There are more people who want to hear about Jesus Christ than there are Christians who are willing to tell them about him. By your life, your kindness and your richness they may come into the kingdom, as you trust

our Lord to give you the courage to share the good news of our wonderful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things'?"

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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