

# The Coming King of Kings

by Ray C. Stedman

---

Last week we looked at a great group of passages that set forth the coming of what the apostle Paul calls "The Man of Lawlessness," the Man of Sin. He is the epitome of all the wide spread philosophy of a lost humanity that man is his own god and that he alone is capable of working out the problems of earth. I want to spend our time this evening on a discussion and a look together at passages that set forth the answer to the man of sin, the "Son of man" who is coming again to earth.

I would like to begin by reading to you a couple of brief paragraphs from a little book I ran across the other day. It deals with this subject of the last days, and in it is found this paragraph:

It is not only the Marxists who think man needs remaking, but also the scientists of the West who propose to turn man from a human being with an unpredictable will and an unmanageable conscience into a robot or a marionette, a compliant human vegetable. The result of these trends is completely predictable. Without realizing it, and certainly without desiring it, man in his incredible blindness has already begun to tip the delicate balance of life. Like a drunk in a canoe, he has thrown his weight around with gay abandon and, perverted by his drunken joy, he cannot see how much water has already been shipped, and that one more violent lurch is sufficient to take him to the bottom.

The apostle Peter tells us that once before in the history of the world this has happened. There was a time when man, in arrogance and pride, boasting of the civilization which he had built, quite unwittingly tripped the lever which held the world of his day in delicate balance. Before he knew what had happened, the clouds began to gather, the sky to darken, the heavens poured down floods of water, the earth heaved, the seas raised and swept across the mountain tops in monstrous waves, and all the world of man perished, except for eight souls who were safely preserved in an ark.

Once again, Jesus suggests, man in his clever insanity will go too far. The sign of it will be a world gone mad with self conceit, permitting and even encouraging its leaders to state publicly what almost everyone secretly believes; that there is no real God, that man is his own god and he does not need any other. Then the deadly lever will be tripped by man's own hand, the dark forces of nature will be released, the seals of nuclear power will be removed, the trumpets of human cruelty will sound out, and the vials of a demented biology will be poured out upon the earth. It is all described in detail in the book of Revelation.

I'm reading from a little book called ["What on Earth's Going to Happen"](#) by an unknown writer [Ray Stedman], and I commend it to you for your further reading.

Now, let's go back to the section of Scripture that we were concerned about a bit last week, the second letter of Paul to the church at Thessalonica. In the second chapter of the second letter, the apostle is dealing with a misconception which these Thessalonian believers held about how they were related to the coming time of trouble on the earth, the predicted "Day of the Lord," which the prophets had described in terrible terminology. Certain false teachers evidently had come among them and had taught them that they were then in the midst of that tribulation. They were going through persecution, as Paul himself and his companions had experienced when they were in the city. These believers, too, were being hounded and driven about and persecuted by Roman authorities. Evidently false brethren coming to them had told them this was the fulfillment of "The Day of the Lord." So they had written to the Apostle about this, and he is writing this letter now to correct that misapprehension. We read some of this chapter last week. I am only going to point several verses within the chapter which deal specifically with how the "Man of Sin," the predicted Anti-Christ, described in many

passages, will finally meet his end. This is Paul's word about it in verse 7.

II Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 7:

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God send upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe [THE lie] what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

It is clear from this brief reference that the answer to the "Man of Sin" and the coming reign of lawless terror culminating in what Jesus described as "The great tribulation which shall be a time of trouble such as never has been seen on earth before or ever will be again" is the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The hope of earth is in the return of Jesus Christ.

Both Testaments confirm this very strongly. There are very few truths which are strongly emphasized in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Only those that are basic to the very program of God and fundamental to the understanding of people in all ages are clearly emphasized in both Testaments, but this is one of them.

If you are familiar with the book of Daniel, you will remember Daniel had a great vision in which he saw the Ancient of Days seated on his throne in the heavens and hundreds of thousands of angels gathered before him. It is very much like John saw at the opening of the book of Revelation and as Ezekiel describes in some of his great visions and as Isaiah saw when he saw the Lord "high and lifted up and his train filled the whole temple." In the great vision of Daniel's he saw one whom he calls "The Son of man" who came to the Ancient of Days and was given all the kingdoms of the earth to be his possessions. So there in the prophet Daniel is a clear indication of the time when Jesus Christ, the Son of man, the prophesied Messiah, will claim the kingdoms of earth to be his.

Then David, remember, in the 2nd Psalm speaks of God saying how the nations rage and the peoples imagine a vain thing and the kings of the earth take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed, but he who sits in the heavens shall hold them in derision and shall laugh at them for their feeble efforts to withstand the program of God. The word of God comes in that great Psalm, "Behold I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill," and he urges the nations, "Kiss the Son lest he be angry and you perish in the way." There again is a clear definition of the coming of the promised Messiah to claim the earth as his rightful inheritance from his Father.

Zechariah, almost the last prophet of the Old Testament, in the last chapter describes how "his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives...", a very literal place, a literal spot on earth, "and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west" so that part of it removes to the north and part of it to the south. Then he will fulfill the promises of the prophets concerning the establishment of his kingdom among men. Israel shall be gathered and mourn for him as one mourns for his only son.

Our Lord Jesus himself in that well known passage in Matthew 24, along with the parallel passages in Mark 13 and Luke 21, tells us that the whole earth shall see the "sign of the Son of man in the heaven," and then they shall see him "coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." In the Revelation, John the apostle tells us that every eye shall see him. So Scripture is replete with many passages that describe the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In II Thessalonians you have a very vivid description of this in the first chapter of this same letter, verse 7.

In I Thessalonians, chapter 1, verse 7, the apostle says the Lord is coming,

To grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

I merely mention these in order to show you how widespread is the hope in Scripture of the coming of Christ again to this earth. This is what we pray for when we pray in the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The hope that God himself will dwell among men, and mankind itself will be his dwelling place. He "shall wipe away all tears from their eyes," and then shall be introduced and fulfilled all the glorious dramas and visions of the prophets. If there is any one truth, therefore, that we ought to hold clear and sharp in our minds, it is this great hope of the coming again of Jesus Christ.

Most people, I have found, think of this as a single point of time, a great event which will occur within a reasonably brief period of time. They think this means Christ will visibly appear, come again to this earth, stand upon it, and beginning at the Mount of Olives will begin to reign throughout the earth, and they feel this is a single great event; one event seen throughout the earth. But a careful study of many Scriptures, both Old and New Testament alike, raises certain questions about that. One question is, "Where does the prediction of Paul in I Thessalonians, chapter 4, verses 16-17, fit in when he describes the Lord 'coming with a shout and the voice of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet and the church being caught up together with him in the air?'" This is a very clear description. It is one that has often been quoted and has resulted in describing this event as the "rapture" of the church. Now, the word rapture does not appear in the passage, but it comes from the Greek word which is translated here "caught up." The Latin word for that is "rapere." It is from that that we get our English word rapture. It literally means "to snatch away." I remember during the days of the Jesus movement the hope of the rapture was called the "Great Snatch." I don't think many of them knew what the Greek word meant, nevertheless, they were right on when they described it that way. It is the great catching away of God's people to join the Lord in the air, not on earth, in the air, and as Paul adds, "so shall we ever be with the Lord."

Now, when does that occur, and how does it fit with this sudden appearing of Jesus Christ in great power and glory with flaming fire taking vengeance? There are many questions raised here. Another question that that passage awakens in our hearts is, "How could Christ's coming be preceded by unmistakable great signs in the earth, signs in the heavens, darkening of the sun and of the moon, signs on the earth, distress among nations, terrible events in the political and economic world, and at the same time be described as a coming "like a thief in the night" with nobody anticipating him. How could that be? Surely after the fulfillment of visible dramatic signs anybody who has ever had a Bible at all, or known anything about it, would be expecting Christ's return. It could hardly come, then, as an unexpected event, coming as a "thief in the night." This raises some questions.

Another question concerns the passage we are looking at here in II Thessalonians. It speaks of someone or something "restraining" the appearance of the Man of Sin. What is holding him back? Why did he not come during the days of the Holocaust? Or before that during some of the great times of trouble that the earth has gone through?

With lives of false prophets and false teachers in the past, why didn't Christ return then? Why didn't he come in the First Century when the church was obviously expecting him, when the City of Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple torn down and the Jewish people scattered among the nations of the earth which seemed to fulfill so exactly our Lord's words as described by Luke in chapter 17. Why didn't he come then? What is it that restrains his coming? This and other questions like this make people wonder whether the coming of Christ can be so simplified as to be just a single event suddenly occurring since it does not explain some of these other questions.

A closer study, therefore, of all the prophetic passages has given rise to the hope of what has been called a "Pretribulational Rapture." I want you to get familiar, if you are not already, with several different terms. There is a term called "pre-millennialism." These jaw-breakers are simply terms that are derived from certain words in Scripture. You will recognize the word "millennial" here. The Millennium is, of course, the predicted thousand year reign of Jesus Christ upon this earth before the final destruction of the heavens and the earth and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth. We will look at that next week. Then there is a series

of beliefs or teachings that are called "post-millennialism." "Pre," of course, means before. "Post" means afterward. This concerns the return of Christ. Is it before the Millennium, before the thousand year reign? Or does it come after the thousand year reign? Then there is still a third division called "a-millennialism," which prefixes the word the millennium with the little prefix "a" which means no millennium, and there are many Bible teachers and Christians today who claim to be amillennialists, i.e., they do not believe in a literal millennium at all. They believe it is now being fulfilled by the church. All those are general divisions of the subject of "eschatology," the subject of the last days. You will hear those terms thrown around, so that is why I give them to you.

However, I want to look at another two terms which are part of the first one. Pre-millennialism divides itself into two camps. One is called "Pre-tribulationism." [Forgive me for this kind of donkey work we are doing here, but I am not sure everyone knows these terms.] The other is "Post-tribulationism." These are both a division of premillennialism. They mean does Jesus come before the Tribulation? Or does he come after the Tribulation? That is essentially the question we are going to discuss tonight. Which is right? If he comes after the tribulation, then the world is looking forward to the "Time of Trouble." That is the next event in the prophetic history of earth, and we cannot expect Jesus Christ to return until the end. He comes, then, to end the tribulation. That is very much as described here. There is some warrant for this view because it does speak of the coming of Christ at the end of the tribulation when he answers and destroys the Man of Sin. But there is also arisen this other view called "Pre-tribulationism" that says there is an aspect of his coming that is before the tribulation.

I think it is very important to understand these terms, and we want to begin our answer to this issue tonight by viewing the key word here. It is the word "parousia" which is translated in most English versions as "the coming" of Christ. You have it here in this very chapter II Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 1, "Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is the word parousia. Again it appears in verse 8, and also in connection with the Antichrist in verse 9, "the coming of the lawless one," ---parousia. When it speaks of coming, we always think of a person walking into a room. That is his "coming." He enters, and we think of it as referring to entrance, but this is an interesting word. The prefix "par" which is short for "para" in Greek means "alongside of" or "with." "Ousia," the rest of the word, is the Greek word for "being." Therefore, it means being with someone, or I think the best word in English that translates this word is the word "presence." Someone who is with us is present. This is the basic thought of this word. Therefore, if you will get in the habit of reading your New Testament translating every occurrence of this word with the word "presence," you will get much more of the meaning. You see presence is not just a sharply defined point of time. It is rather a beginning and an ending with a continuation, or a duration, in between, and the whole thing is labeled the parousia, the presence. Now that is what is speaking about with regard to the Lord Jesus. He will come, but come to be present for awhile. Then at the end there will come the "epiphaneia" of his "parousia." Now, those two words are found together in this very chapter.

II Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 8:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming.

Notice how that is translated, "by his appearing *and* his coming." That sounds like it is two separate things, his appearing and his coming. Yet those are obviously so closely connected that it could be that it is one event described with two terms, his appearing and his coming.

But why would Paul describe the same event with two synonyms? The answer is that this is a rather poor translation. It is not two things at all, or if it is they are very closely related in a different way than what I have just outlined. The word "epiphaneia" which is what is translated "his appearing" is "epi" which means "out" and "phaneia" which means "to shine." It comes from the Greek word "phaino" to shine. The idea here is the "out-shining" or, as some have translated it in English, "the unveiling." It is "the manifestation, the out-shining" of something. The term is really the "out-shining of his presence." So, taken in that light and in view of the fact that parousia means a presence, a duration of time, it is an event which is simply the open visible manifestation of a presence that has been here for sometime before. If you understand that phrase very clearly, I think you will have a key to fitting together all the passages of Scripture that deal with the second

coming of our Lord. It is not just one single event coming at the end of time, but it is a series of events in which our Lord is present on earth during a definite period of time, finally making his presence visible by a sudden appearing "in power and in glory," a shining out, which would fit all these descriptions of him coming with flaming fire, in power and great glory, etc. That gives you a clear clue, I think, to how to understand the coming of Christ. He is coming with a "presence."

The question that comes now is, "When does the parousia begin?" When can we expect this presence of the Lord in a rather secret, hidden way that will ultimately be revealed by the out-shining of his glory at the end of the tribulation? And to answer that I want to go back to our Lord's own words found in Matthew 24. This is the teaching of Jesus himself on that dramatic occasion when he sat with the disciples on the Mount of Olive before he was betrayed and answered some of their questions. In Matthew 24, verse 3 you have the questions the disciples asked him.

Matthew 24, verse 3:

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be?"

That question relates to the previous verse when the disciples had looked at the buildings of the temple, that glorious building that was an architectural wonder, and had pointed out the great stones that were there. Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down." And it is to that answer that the disciples address the question, "When will this be?" Then they asked,

...and what will be the sign of your coming [Here they use the very word we have been discussing "parousia." Then a third question.] and of the close of the age? [So there are three questions here.]

Our Lord answers them in the following verses. I am not going to take time to read them all to you, but I want to outline the answers for you. First he answers the question, "When will this be?"---the destruction of the temple when will it be? His answer covers from verse 4 through verse 14 in chapter 24 of Matthew. What he does at this point is project himself through what we now know to be thousands of years of history; from that moment until our present moment in history and beyond. Who knows how much longer beyond. He also covers in very brief sweep the characterizations of that whole age of history. He speaks about false Christs who will come and lead people astray, about nations rising against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, increasing persecution of the people of God until many of them are delivered up to betrayal and death, love growing cold, wickedness increasing, and then the gospel of the kingdom being preached throughout this whole earth. Now these are not what are oftentimes called "signs of the times." They are not. They are signs of the whole age. They are characterizations of the whole age. And what he is saying to, "When will this be?" is that all of these signs must be fulfilled and then the temple will be destroyed. What the disciples did not realize, and could not have realized, was that he was not talking about the building that was standing at that moment. In Luke 21 he does talk about that, and he tells them, "When you see the armies surrounding Jerusalem, then you will know it's time to get out of the city because the city is going to be destroyed." But here he is looking on to another temple yet to be built which will be destroyed and a later fulfillment. He gives all these indications of what must happen in history before that time. This is a very familiar phenomenon in prophetic passages. This double fulfillment, this leap over the years must always be taken into account. If with our understanding of the New Testament, we look at the Old Testament, we now know many of the events described in the Old Testament in connection with Christ's coming were a blending of the first coming and the second coming. No one could tell them apart. It would have been impossible to separate the second coming events from the first coming events before Christ first came. So, we do not need to blame the disciples for being confused at this point or for the early Christians expecting an immediate coming of Christ. He meant it to be that way. It was very difficult to tell. So it is in this case. Anyway we have here the answer he gave to question one.

Then in Chapter 24, verse 15 he skips over the second question for the time being and answers the third question, "What will be the sign of the close of the age, the end of the age?" Daniel had spoken of a "time of the end." Other prophets had referred to this. Now Jesus answers their questions, "What will be the sign that

the age is about to end?" His answer is in verse 15.

Matthew chapter 24, verse 15:

So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place, [That is not the temple that was there on Mount Zion at the time but the one that is to be built in the last days,] then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house; ...Pray that your flight may not be in the winter...For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been shortened, no flesh would be saved."

He speaks of days when the entire extermination of the race was possible, but those days are to be shortened for the elect's sake. Then he goes on to warn about being deceived about these events, and his word continues through verse 28. This is the section in which he answers the question, "What will be the sign of the close of the age?" The sign is the same sign that Paul speaks of in II Thessalonians, the Man of Sin seated in the temple proclaiming himself to be God. That is the "desolating sacrilege" which Daniel also predicted. That is the sign indicating the age has reached its close. It is not the beginning of that close. It occurs actually in the middle of Daniel's seventieth week which is seven years long. A sign in Scripture does not necessarily mark the beginning or the ending of anything but the character of it. This sign will be that which marks the close of the age.

Then beginning with Matthew 24, verse 29 through verse 31, Jesus answers question number two, "What will be the sign of your coming, the parousia, your presence?" And he answers this very clearly in these verses. They are short enough I can read them to you.

Matthew, chapter 24, verse 29:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days [This follows the great tribulation] the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, [Now what is that sign? Well, it is not the coming of Jesus because he goes on to say]...and they will see the Son of man coming [If it is not the coming, then what is it ?]

Well, all through Scripture there has been a special, peculiar, particular sign of the presence of God. Can you guess what it is? It is the shining cloud of glory called the Shekinah which hovered over the tribes of Israel as they passed through the desert and guarded them by day and by night. When the temple was dedicated by King Solomon, at the moment of dedication the cloud of glory filled the temple and rested upon the Ark of the Covenant as a sign that God was dwelling in the midst of his people. Now it is instructive that when the disciples were with Jesus on the Mount of Olives at the time of his ascension, it says, "They saw him ascending into the heavens until a cloud received him out of their sight." And when he comes again, he will come it says, "in the clouds." Here again you have in this very passage that he will be,

Matthew, chapter 24, verse 30b:

...coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

So the sign of his coming which is the end of the parousia, the final event of it, the out-shining of his presence is the Shekinah cloud of glory.

Then he speaks of the signs we can look for to know this day is drawing nigh, the fig tree, etc., but beginning at verse 36 he goes on. The disciples had not ask for this. They did not know about it, but he goes on to give them some information they would not have known.

Matthew chapter 24, verse 36:

But of that day and hour no one knows, [Now, if you have any tendency to set dates or to believe people who set dates, take your pen and underline this verse] not even the angels of heaven, [let alone the prognosticators of earth] nor the Son, [Isn't that amazing? In the days of his flesh our Lord himself did not know the time of his coming. He was limited in his humanity. He knew many things that we do not know, but he did not know this] but the Father only.

There is a warning here not to set dates. It precedes the revelation he is going to give that this event he now is going to describe is an imminent event, i.e., could come at any time, but no one knows when and cannot know. He describes it.

Matthew, chapter 24, verse 37:

As were the days of Noah, so will be the parousia of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the parousia of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

My question now is, "Could this possibly, by any stretch of the imagination, be the same coming that is described just a few verses earlier as the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory preceded by a terrible time of trouble and with terrible signs in the heavens and on the earth?" Could it be the same? I don't see how anybody could say this is the same event being described here. Our Lord begins by likening it to the days of Noah. He says, "In the days of Noah before the flood life was going on as usual." That is the meaning of this paragraph. In Luke's account you will find that Luke adds the days of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah. In the same way, he says. Lot and the people of Sodom did not know any judgment was intended. They were just doing what comes naturally, and that is what our Lord describes here. Before the flood, although it was a time of violence with wickedness widespread throughout the earth and a time of a troubled civilization, nevertheless people were doing the usual things. They were getting married and eating and drinking, etc. That is a vivid description of life going on as usual. Nothing unusual occurring. Nothing that had not been occurring for centuries in the history of man. But suddenly, when they did not know, a flood came and swept them all away. So, he says, in like manner will be the parousia of the Son of man.

So, we have here in this one discourse both the ending and the beginning of our Lord's parousia, his presence on earth. It ends in the out-shining, the manifestation of power and glory. It begins with a secret coming seen only by the believers who hear the voice of the Lord, the command of the Lord, the archangel's cry and the trump of God and suddenly disappear to be with the Lord, to meet the Lord in the air, as Paul says. Remember how he also amplifies that in I Corinthians 15, verse 51. He says,

"Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed," [That is a word to believers.] "We shall not all die, but we shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye."

It is the event called the "rapture" or the snatching away, the departure of the church. And, as our Lord tells us, it will be highly selective. Two men will be in the field working, one taken, one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill, one taken, one left. And Luke adds in his account, two men will be in the same bed, one taken, one left. It is very interesting that you have a description of an event which finds the earth in darkness at one place, where men have gone to bed, and another place where they are out in the field working. This is an indication that the great snatch is a simultaneous event happening all over the earth with part of the earth in darkness and part of the earth in light, part daytime, part nighttime. Our Lord comes without the world's knowledge. They do not know what has happened, and according to the hints that are given in various Scriptures, Christ remains, in a sense, behind the scenes of the great tribulation, the day of wrath, appearing

and disappearing to those who are his own. The church is with him. "So shall we ever be with the Lord," says the Apostle. So we enter into the fulfillment of some of these words the Apostle speaks as we share the judgments of the Lord. We shall judge angels. We shall judge among the nations, etc. This is the beginning of that time when the church enters into the Lord's ministry in a kind of secret presence here on the earth.

Now, if you see it in that way, you will understand what our Lord says the world will be saying at that time. For 40 days after his resurrection, our Lord appeared and disappeared to his own. Remember the accounts in the gospels? Suddenly he would be in the room, and then he would be gone. They would be walking down a road, and he was with them. They were up in Galilee, and there he was up there. He appeared and disappeared and the whole ministry of the post resurrection period is what occurs again when he comes back, and he begins to appear and disappear. This is why he says in the account here, "People will say, 'Where is he?'" Rumors of his appearance will be widespread, rife on the earth, and people will go around saying, "Where is he?" Some false prophets will say, "He is in the desert." Others will say, "No, he is in the inner room. We have a special contract with him. He only appears in our meeting," and our Lord's word is, "If they say that, do not go with them. Do not pay any attention to them, because as the lightning shines from the east to the west so will be the parousia of the Son of man." What he means by that is not that a bolt of lightning actually covers the whole of the heavens. It never does. But when it strikes, its effects are worldwide. That is what he means here, and he warns that this will be the case.

144,000 Jews, called out of each of the 12 tribes of Israel, will openly bear witness during this time. A multitude of gentiles---greater number than anyone can number---out of every tribe and nation on earth, will come to believe in him at the cost of their own lives in many many cases. John sees this in the book of Revelation. At the end of it there is an unveiling of his appearance. After the Man of Sin, at the middle of this week, reveals himself in the temple and the terrible judgments of the tribulation come down during this last 3-1/2 year period, at the end our Lord reveals himself in the clouds of the heavens as the one who has come to take over the kingdoms of this earth.

Now, one final question, "Who is the restrainer?" I go back to II Thessalonians for that. There is a word here that is very important.

II Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 5:

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.

You know, I used to read that passage and get very angry with Paul. "Why tell these people they know, and not tell us because we want to know too?" I used to do that with some of the things our Lord said too. I would get very upset that he did not say the whole thing until I realized that when the Scripture does not specifically tell you something, it is usually because that something is obvious, well known. I want to say to you tonight, "You know what restrains him too." The mystery of lawlessness is already at work. It is not only working in the world but it is working in you and in me. What restrains that mystery of evil in our own nature? Galatians 5:17 tells us very plainly. "The flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh so that you cannot do what you would do." That is a restrainer. The flesh under control, limited by the Spirit. This takes us back to our Lord's words when he said in the Sermon on the Mount those amazing words, "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth." Light dispels darkness, and God's people in any age or time or clime are the light of the world. Jesus said later, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world," but when he left physically, the continuous light would be manifested through his people, "You are the light of the world."

Now salt is a different ministry. What does salt do? It arrests corruption. It restrains decay, moral decay. We put salt on meat to preserve it from corruption and decay. The ancients knew that very well. Every bit of fish that was sent from Galilee down to Jerusalem was packed in salt to preserve it during the long journey down to its marketplace. They knew this well. This is what Jesus meant, "You are the salt of the earth." It is the Spirit working in us and through us that is the restraint against the world being taken over by evil.

You and I often sing the blues about what is going on in our world. We listen to the 6 o'clock "Blues" every night, and then we echo it in our own feelings, "How terrible things are getting." Oftentimes I think we are



tempted to think that evil is rampant, that it is in control. It really is not. It never has been. There has never been a time on earth when evil was in control. Do you know how I know? Because to this very day evil has to disguise itself as good in order to be accepted. Is that not true? Politicians can not get away with outright lies. They have to appear to be good. They have to sound like they are telling the truth. Prostitutes want to be known as "ladies." Evil cannot manifest itself widely. Desperadoes and gangsters and others have to appear as good well-meaning persons, salt-of-the-earth. Evil has to disguise itself because good is in control. That may sound rather amazing, but it is true. I know we often feel like the little rhyme that says:

Our race had a splendid beginning,  
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.  
We hope that the story will end in God's glory,  
But at present the other side's winning.

But it really is not. Much more true are the words of the poet James Russell Lowell when he said:

Though the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet 'tis truth alone that's strong.  
Truth forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the throne.  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
And behind the dim unknown  
Standeth God within the shadows  
Keeping watch above his own

You see there is a restraining force on earth. It is the presence of the church, the Spirit of God in his people, and God cannot bring about the terrible judgments of the tribulation until that force is taken out of the way. When it is the Man of Sin shall be revealed. That is why there has been born, supported by other passages I do not have time to go into here, the hope within the church that we will be spared the judgment of the great tribulation, not spared tribulation because we all have that in various degrees. Some generations of Christians have gone through terrible tribulation, but as to the great tribulation, there is the promise given to us that we shall not be part of it.

I Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 9:

For God has not destined us for wrath, [That is what the great tribulation is, the wrath of God] but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might be together with him.

That is the hope he holds out in this whole section. Well, my time is gone but I want to point this out. We are not, therefore, waiting for tribulation. What are we waiting for? We are waiting for the Lord Jesus. I want to close with reading a beautiful expression of this in a rhyme by Annie Johnson Flint.

It is not for a sign we are watching,  
For wonders above and below,  
The pouring of vials of judgments,  
The sounding of trumpets of woe.  
It is not for a day we are looking,  
Not even the time yet to be,  
When the earth shall be filled with God's glory,  
As the waters cover the sea.  
It is not for a king we are longing,  
To make the world kingdoms his own.  
It is not for a judge who will summon  
The nations of earth to his throne.  
Not for these, though we know they are coming,  
For they are but adjuncts of him,

Before whom all glory is clouded,  
Beside whom all splendor grows dim.  
We wait for the Lord, our beloved,  
Our comforter, Master and friend,  
The substance of all that we hope for,  
Beginning of faith and its end.  
We watch for our Saviour and Bridegroom,  
Who loved us and made us his own.  
For him we are looking and longing,  
For Jesus and Jesus alone.

Well, what are we to do while we wait? Our Lord tells us. In one of his parables he says he gave certain talents to various individuals and said to them, "Occupy until I come." Keep busy. Get to work. Live as he told you to live with the power that he himself gives. Utilize what he has given you, the gifts of the Spirit that are yours, the opportunities that are found around you. "Occupy until I come." That is the hope of the church.

Next week we want to look at the coming time of peace, the Millenium and beyond it to the new heavens and the new earth.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, our Father, for the blessed hope that burns in our hearts as we read these Scriptures that our Lord is going to come for his own. We understand, Lord, that he knows the hearts. We cannot fool him. We cannot hide behind pretensions and spacious claims of religious possession or knowledge which we do not really have. When he comes to claim his own, he will know exactly who they are. Lord, how this makes us take a look at ourselves and like those disciples in the upper room confronted with the possibility of betrayal say to you Lord Jesus, "Is it I?" Grant, Lord, that we might be true and sure and real and genuine in our faith and living it day-by-day that we may stand before the Lord of Glory when he comes. We thank you for that promise and hope is Jesus' name. Amen.

---

Message delivered at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, California on January 23, 1983.  
Transcribed by Helen DeCoursey, August 28, 1996

[Back to the Ray C. Stedman Library](#)