

THE MAN WHO CLAIMS TO BE GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

We come to a passage now where we must confront the question of whether the church will go through the great tribulation. Does the Lord come for his church before the great time of trouble that is coming; does he come in the middle of it; or does the church in fact go through the tribulation and Jesus comes at the end. That is a much debated and controversial question. The Scriptures are at times hard to understand concerning these issues; that is why there are differences of opinion among believers regarding them. All evangelicals agree, however, that only these three possibilities exist: a pre, mid, or post tribulational coming.

This question should not be confused with a similar sounding issue concerning the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ. There are also premillennial, postmillennial and amillennial viewpoints, which deal with the question of whether there will be a millennium or not. But we are not dealing with the question of the millennium this morning but with the question which has been a battleground through the centuries: Will the church still be here on earth during the great time of trouble?

I have been studying this passage for almost fifty years. I have read all the arguments pro and con, and while I will not try to share all of that information with you I will try to point out, as we go through Verses 1-12 of Chapter 2, why I believe the Scriptures teach that the church will not go through the great tribulation, and why I reject the arguments of the post-tribulationists.

Paul introduces the chapter with these words:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. {2 Th 2:1-2 RSV}

There are two very important matters here which I want to deal with briefly:

First, note that the apostle clearly states what he wants to talk about. He is relating the coming, the *parousia*, of the Lord Jesus to what he calls "our assembling to meet him." Everyone agrees that this phrase refers to what we call the rapture of the church, described in these words in First Thessalonians 4:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, ... And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; {1 Th 4:16-17a RSV}

If you think of the coming of the Lord as but a single event that occurs within a 24-hour period you will conclude that this phrase "our assembling to meet him" is part of that event. Thus, you will already have begun to conclude that the Lord's appearing in glory does not come until the end of the tribulation and the rapture will be part of it. But when we remember that the word *parousia* means "presence," not "coming" (although it is frequently translated "coming"), it suggests a series of events during the whole of which time Jesus is present. If we look at it that way, then what Paul is proposing to discuss here is: At what point does our assembling to meet Jesus come in that series of events? In other words, the time of the rapture.

The second important thing to note in these introductory verses is that Paul describes the condition of these Thessalonian believers as one of deep agitation and disturbance. How these words are translated will go far toward determining what position one takes regarding the rapture. The apostle is uncertain of what caused this agitation. Something had started them thinking that the terrible "day of the Lord" had already begun and that they were already going through it. In the first letter, Paul had described that day as one of sudden destruction, with no escape possible, as with a woman in travail. The Old Testament prophets had described it as a day of distress and anguish, ruin and devastation.

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These letters clearly show that the Thessalonians were going through a time of great persecution under the Roman authorities. Perhaps someone in their assembly had uttered a prophecy or had interpreted a passage of Scripture to the effect that the Day of the Lord had come. Perhaps, as Paul himself suggests, a letter purportedly written by him was read saying that the day of the Lord's wrath had arrived. Paul evidently was unsure exactly what had brought on the agitation they were experiencing. But the result is not, as the RSV text has it, that they were "shaken in mind or excited." That suggests that having already been taught that Jesus would not come until the end of the Day of the Lord, they were excited that he was now about to appear. If the passage is read that way it looks as though the church will go through the tribulation. If the Lord was not coming until the end of that time of trouble, then they could now count on his soon coming and they became excited in anticipation that Jesus himself was about to appear. One post-tribulational commentator says that what was going on was "wild anticipation of the immediate return of Christ."

But the words do not mean that! The phrase literally says, "you were shaken out of your mind." We would say they were driven out of their wits; they were (in the vernacular) "all shook up!" Linked with this is a word that can only be translated "disturbed." (The same word is translated "alarmed" in the RSV of Mark 13:7) They were not excited and jazzed about the coming of the Lord. Rather they were scared out of their minds! It was sweaty palms and white knuckles all the way!

The question this raises is, "What would make them feel that way?" Back in the '30's when I was a young Christian, I read a book that was very popular among Christians entitled, *In The Twinkling Of An Eye*. It was a novel of a family of church members, some of whom returned home one day to find the table set and everything ready for dinner, but no one was there. Upon investigation they discovered that the rest of the family and some of their friends had disappeared. Then it dawned upon them that the rapture had occurred, the true church had disappeared, and they were left behind. They knew enough about the Bible to know that they were headed for a terrible time of trouble. They were scared out of their wits and turned white with fear.

That is why the Thessalonians felt as they did. They thought the rapture had occurred and they had somehow missed it and now the Day of the Lord had arrived. I have even felt that way myself.

Once I entered a room where I expected to find a group of Christians, only to discover that no one was there. I learned later that something had occurred so that they all had run outside, but the room was strewn with papers, and books were lying open on tables with every evidence of having just been used. I thought to myself, "Oh! I've missed it!" Now why would a pretribulational Christian think that? The answer is: There is enough self-doubt in all of us that we all wonder whether we are genuine when we get into a situation like that.

When our Lord said to the disciples in the Upper Room, "One of you will betray me," every one of them responded, "Lord, is it I?" {Matt26:21-22 RSV}. Only one of them intended to betray him but their question demonstrates that they did not trust their self-knowledge all that much.

It seems clear that this is the condition which the apostle is describing among the Thessalonians in these opening verses. In Verses 3-5 we see how he handles this situation.

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who 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. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? {2 Th 2:3-5 RSV}

Notice that Paul does not say to them, "Now don't worry. If the Day of the Lord had come you would not be here; you would have been raptured." The fact that Paul does not say this is made much of by the post-tribulationists. They say, "If it is true that Paul had taught them that the Lord was coming before the Day of the Lord, then he would simply have said to them, 'You would not be here if the Day of the Lord had come.'" The fact that Paul does not say this makes them feel sure the apostle had taught them a post-tribulational coming.

We must ask ourselves: "Why did he not say that?" The answer is that Paul was not sure that all of them had truly become Christians. He is very careful not to risk giving them a false sense of assurance by glibly

saying, "If you believe in Christ then you are safe." There are many people who believe themselves to be Christians, but they really are not. They have gone along with the outward appearances of Christianity, but they have never surrendered their inner will to the Lord. If Paul had said to such nominal Christians in Thessalonica that they would certainly have been raptured he would have sealed them in a false view of their security.

As a matter of fact, as we will see in a moment, he does say to them that Christians will be raptured before the tribulation, but he does so in a very guarded and hidden way. We will see more of that in a moment.

I must also point out that there is considerable evidence that the word that is translated "rebellion," or "apostasy" (as some versions have it), should more properly be translated "the departure." Read that way the apostle is clearly saying that the Day of the Lord cannot come until the departure of the church has first taken place. The book, *Rethinking the Rapture*," written by a dear friend of mine, Dr. E. Schuyler English, will make this clear to any who want further information.

However, for the sake of argument, let us take the word as "apostasy" or "rebellion." What Paul is saying, then, is that the unmistakable sign that the Day of the Lord has begun is that the "Man of lawlessness" (or, as the King James Version renders it, "the Man of sin"), has been revealed, and the great worldwide apostasy that he will lead has started.

I want to point out here that this agrees exactly with what Jesus taught in the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24, which deals with the great series of events that must occur before the time of the end. Our Lord says, in Matthew 24:15:

"So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) [this last phrase was added by Matthew], 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; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the sabbath. 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." {Matt 24:15-21 RSV}

That clearly agrees with what the apostle says here. Thus, the person we have presented here is the long expected antichrist, the false Messiah, or the "Hopelessly Lost One," which is what the phrase "the son of perdition" means. There is only one other person called by that name in the New Testament and that is Judas, the betrayer of our Lord. Jesus refers to the antichrist as "the desolating sacrilege ... standing in the holy place." Paul describes him as one "who 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." That is exactly what Jesus said. This man takes his place in the temple as a desolating sacrilege. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he had told them about this when he was with them. The reference here, therefore, is but a footnote to what he had already taught them. I wish we had the whole account of what he had said but obviously we have, by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, enough to understand what he taught if we think it through very carefully.

Beginning in Verse 6 the apostle gets to the heart of his comments:

And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 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. {2 Th 2:6-7 RSV}

According to the apostle, the Day of the Lord cannot come until the Man of lawlessness is revealed. But the Man of lawlessness cannot be revealed until some restraining power is taken out of the way. The question that needs to be asked at this point, therefore, is, what is that restraining power? The apostle's response to this question is, "You know what it is." There is no need to tell the Thessalonians; they already know! If we ask how did they know, the answer, of course, is that Paul had probably told them when he was with them. But even if he had not I feel they would have known.

The reason is that every born again Christian knows what it is that restrains evil. It is interesting that the

word the apostle employs here for "know" is not the word *ginosko*, which means "to learn by experience." Rather it is the word *oido*, which means "to know by insight, by inner information." I believe that, even today, I could ask any young Christian the question, "Since Christ has come into your life, have you found anything that restrains evil in you?" From long experience I know that the answer would be, "Oh, yes, everything is different. I no longer have the same desires now that the Lord has come into my life." What that answer conveys is that the Holy Spirit has come in, and, thus, God himself dwells within him.

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul teaches us that the desires of our flesh are opposed to the desires of the Spirit, and the Spirit's desires are opposed by the flesh, in order "to prevent you from doing what you would," {Gal 5:17b RSV}. There is a mighty power at work that restrains evil in believers, and, through believers, it is at work restraining evil in the world. That is why Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth," {Matt 5:13a RSV}. Believers are the salt that preserves this world from decay and corruption. They are also the light of the world for while they are in it they relieve the terrible darkness of the world by means of the Holy Spirit. That is why many of the commentators agree that this refers to the Holy Spirit in the church.

Paul goes on to say there is a mystery of evil at work in our world. He calls it "the mystery of lawlessness" which is already at work. It is the strange secret of universal evil. Even secular prophets are puzzled by it. What is it about our race that makes it so difficult to correct the conditions that destroy it? Why is drug trafficking so impossible to stop when it is clearly evident what terrible things it does to people? Why is it that alcoholics will return again and again to their habit when they see that it is destroying their homes and families, and even their own lives? It is a mystery; the mystery of lawlessness; the strange secret of human evil. Why is it that as the centuries go by we have made zero progress in curing human wickedness? We are still wrestling with the problem just as people wrestled with it five thousand years before Christ. We do not make any progress in this area.

This can be put another way. Why is it that Jews today are unable to build a temple upon Mt. Moriah? Some of us here are closely associated with a number of Jews in Jerusalem who have committed themselves with all their lives and possessions to rebuilding the temple. We have been following their efforts for some years, and find that they are totally frustrated. They cannot seem to get anywhere. Why is this? It is because something is restraining them! A temple will one day be built on the spot where the Dome of the Rock now stands and that is the place where the Man of lawlessness will take his seat and proclaim himself to be God. Why has that temple not been built since there are Jews with powerful political connections (I can personally testify to this) who are completely dedicated to building it? It is because the time has not yet come. There is a force that is restraining it. Just as God would not destroy the earth until Noah and his family had entered the ark (a picture of being "with Christ"); and just as God would not rain judgment on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, despite their terrible evil, until Lot and his family had first been removed; so God will not begin the last terrible judgment upon this earth until the church has been removed. The Spirit-indwelt church is the restraining force!

For years I have been trying to get across to Christians what tremendous power they could exercise in the world today, if only they knew who they were. And likewise what tremendous evil they permit in the world when they refuse to live as God wants them to live. That is why society falls apart. What happened in the '60's and '70's when we went through a terrible incursion of evil into society, with a breakdown of morals on every side, and the rise of previously unacceptable public practices, was that the church had failed to live as God had called it to live. Christians had instead begun to live for themselves instead of for the Lord.

Let me point out something interesting here. It says in Verse 7: "... only he who now restrains will do so until he is out of the way." That phrase "out of the way," when translated literally, is, "becomes out of the midst." It does not say he is "taken out of the midst"; rather it says, "he becomes out of the midst." It reminds us of Paul's word in First Corinthians 15 where he says of the church, "We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye," {1 Cor 15:51b-52a}. We will suddenly be removed -- "out of the midst."

Then, says Paul, "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." When the church through whom the Spirit works to restrain sin is removed -- the Spirit is not removed, merely his restraining instrument -- then begins the work of the Lawless One. It will last, we learn from Revelation and from Daniel, for 3-1/2 years, but it will end with what is described here as, literally, "the unveiling of the presence of Jesus." That is what this phrase, "his appearing and his coming" actually says. It is "by the shining out of his presence"; i.e. Jesus,

with his church, had been here all along behind the scenes, but now he is made visible and it is that unveiling which destroys the antichrist. Our Lord but utters a word and the Man of lawlessness is destroyed.

Further details of this are given in Revelation 19:

And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet [this is the Man of lawlessness] who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth [the word of God uttered by the lips of Jesus]; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh. {Rev 19:20-21 RSV}

In Verses 9-12, we have a description of the methods of the Man of lawlessness.

The coming [literally the *parousia*, "the presence"] 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 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 Th 2:9-12 RSV}

You may be thinking that these verses do not apply to you. You are born again and you are going to be caught up before this happens, therefore it does not concern you.

But remember that, in Verse 7, Paul says "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work." These verses describe the way evil works in our world today; it will be made world-wide in that day. But this is the way evil is working here on our Peninsula right now.

Notice five things are stated:

First, its origin is Satan, at work behind the scenes. As Paul says in Ephesians, "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and wicked spirits in high places, the rulers of the darkness of this world," {cf, Eph 6:12 KJV}.

Second, Satan gains a following with counterfeit miracles. We have seen in recent days a revival of interest in healing miracles. Some of them are real (because, if there are some counterfeit, there are also some real) but many of them will be counterfeit. They claim to show God's hand at work, but they are either psychologically or demonically inspired. There needs to be great care exercised in this area.

Third, Satan employs various forms of deceptive evil; things that offer what seems good but which are ultimately destructive. We have already listed a number of these -- drugs, alcohol, perverted forms of sexuality, gambling, adulterous affairs, etc. These are always made to look like something wonderful, they seem to offer much, but the end result is pain, heartache and destruction.

Fourth, this approach makes its appeal to those who "refuse to love the truth," who have no time for the Scriptures, who refuse to judge themselves and will not listen to anyone who, even lovingly, tries to point out that what they are doing is wrong. Such people have set their feet upon a downward slant that will end in destruction.

Fifth, this opens the door for the ultimate delusion: They will believe what Scripture calls "the lie." The RSV puts this too lightly: "make them believe what is false." Literally, it is "the lie." The lie that has been propagated from the very beginning; the lie that was found in the Garden of Eden and has been in the world ever since. It is the lie that says, "You can be God in your own world. Really! You can run your own life. You can do whatever you want." That is "the lie," and that is what people everywhere today are believing. That, says the apostle, will become a world-wide condition under the influence of this evil person who is called the "Man of lawlessness." It is humanism, the worship of man, in its ultimate form.

What the apostle is underscoring through all this is that the Day of the Lord has not yet come. It is, then, still the day of grace! People can still open their eyes, and yet believe the truth.

You can yet turn to Jesus, and be redeemed, and so belong to that crowd who, not because of their own righteousness but because they have trusted in the righteousness of Another, will be caught up to be with the Lord before the great day of trouble begins on earth.

Where do you stand?

That is where the apostle leaves us.

Have you surrendered your life to Christ?

Do you belong to him? Does he run your affairs? Do you listen to his words? Do you love him and follow him?

If not, this is a moment when you can make that decision.

You can say, "Lord Jesus, I invite you to enter my life, to take it over. Help me to follow you and walk in the ways of righteousness." Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any one will open the door, I will come in to him [or her] and will eat with him," {Rev 3:20 RSV}. That is his promise.

Open that door to him now for he is prepared to save you from the wrath to come.

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