

Who Is the Image of the Beast? #6

Ezra 7:11-12

Revelation 13:14-15

2 Thessalonians 2:7-9

April 28, 2013

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After the recent terrorist bombings in Boston, photos appeared on a major news network of a young man suspected to be one of the terrorists. Seeking to match possible suspects to video clips from the security cams, this news network believed they had found a match. However, they were wrong. The young man (whose photo they posted) was not the same young man who appeared on the video clips from the security cams—a clear case of culpable mistaken identity by this news network.

The Apostle Paul has taken a photo (if you will) of the Antichrist and has posted in this inspired letter of 2 Thessalonians, Chapter 2, a verbal description of Antichrist. I believe many sincere professing Christians have made a similar error in regard to Paul's description of Antichrist. Many have taken Paul's descriptive "photo" of Antichrist and have said, "This is Nero from the first century." Others have identified Paul's descriptive "photo" of Antichrist as a future Islamic Mahdi, or as a future worldwide political leader (whether Jewish or Gentile). But, I submit, that all of these are as clearly a case of culpable mistaken identity as was that of the news network which wrongly associated the young man with the terrorist viewed from the security cams. For none of these aforementioned characters look like the descriptive "photo" of Antichrist given to us by Paul (in 2 Thessalonians 2). Consider the descriptive "photo" thus far given to us by Paul.

Description #1: Antichrist will be revealed **BEFORE** the gathering of the Church to Christ at His bodily Second Coming of Christ, and not revealed **AFTER** that glorious event ("for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition" 2 Thessalonians 2:3). This biblical description of Antichrist demonstrates that the Futurist's view of a future Antichrist (whether an Islamic Mahdi or a global world leader of Jewish or Gentile origin) who will be manifested **AFTER** the Rapture of the Church to be in error.

Description #2: Antichrist will proceed out of a Great Apostasy (i.e. a Great Falling Away from biblical faithfulness) from **WITHIN** the Visible Church ("except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition" 2 Thessalonians 2:3). Neither a Nero of the Preterists, nor an Islamic Mahdi or a global political leader of the Futurists, will have their respective "Antichrists" proceeding out of a Great Falling Away from soundness of doctrine, from purity of worship, and from rightly administered Church government from **WITHIN** the Visible Church.

Description #3: Antichrist will be like Judas (both of whom are called "the Son of Perdition"—Judas in John 17:12 and Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:3) in claiming apostolic authority from **WITHIN** the Visible Church, in claiming to follow and represent Christ, in claiming to teach and preach Christ, and will (like Judas) betray Christ with a kiss of friendship. This is not true of a past Nero, or a future Islamic Mahdi, or a future global political leader (who is a Jew or a Gentile).

Description #4: Antichrist will claim to sit as visible head of the Church upon earth from **WITHIN** the Visible Church, usurping the titles, offices, and prerogatives of Christ, as Mediator and God ("so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God [i.e. Church of God—GLP], showing himself that he is God" 2 Thessalonians 2:4). Daniel and John add that Antichrist will rule for 1,260 years (Daniel 7:25; Revelation 11:1-2), which time period has

been addressed in previous sermons. This is not true of Nero, nor will it be true of a future Mahdi or a future global political leader (whether a Jew or a Gentile).

Thus, I submit, there is a clear case of culpable mistaken identity on the part of Preterists and Futurists in their respective identity of Antichrist in the descriptive “photo” given by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2.

Let us continue at this time with what the Apostle Paul reveals concerning Antichrist from 2 Thessalonians 2:7-9. The main points from our text are the following: (1) The Mystery of Iniquity in the Age of the Apostles and after Their Deaths; (2) The Restrainer Revealed and Removed; (3) The Lawless Antichrist Revealed and Destroyed.

I. The Mystery of Iniquity in the Age of the Apostles and after Their Deaths (“For the mystery of iniquity doth already work” 2 Thessalonians 2:7a).

A. Having given a photographic description of Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians that he had already given to them this information in a previous visit to them (2 Thessalonians 2:5) and that they knew what restrained Antichrist (called by Paul, the “Man of Sin” and “Son of Perdition”) from being revealed in the apostolic age (2 Thessalonians 2:6). We will consider the Restrainer in the next main point, but carefully note that Paul does NOT write in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, “For iniquity doth already work”, but rather states, “For the MYSTERY OF INIQUITY doth already work.” It was not merely “iniquity” that was working in the apostolic age, but it was “the MYSTERY of iniquity”. Let’s briefly consider the meaning of this phrase: “the mystery of iniquity”.

1. First, the phrase, “the mystery of iniquity” refers to some hidden or concealed lawlessness (for the Greek word used for “iniquity” is *anomia*, which literally means, without law, or lawlessness, cp. 1 John 3:4). Later on in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul calls Antichrist “that Wicked” (i.e. that Wicked One), but the word used for “wicked” is *anomos*, (that Lawless One). Thus, “the mystery of iniquity” (or mystery of lawlessness) suggests a satanic and secret conspiracy to conceal lawlessness in doctrine, worship, government, and morals, and to gradually (like leaven) work this lawlessness into the Church, with a view to introducing and revealing that Wicked (or Lawless) One, the Man of Sin, the Son of Perdition, who is Antichrist.

2. Second, you will recall that the Great Harlot Church of Rome (that sits upon the seven hills of Rome) appears in Revelation 17:5 having this name written on her forehead: “Mystery Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth.” Whereas, we see that the faithful Bride of Christ has the name of God written on her forehead (Revelation 14:1; Revelation 22:4—we’ll have more to say about this in a future sermon when we consider the Mark of the Beast). The Great Harlot Church of Rome (the Papal Church of Rome) is also a mystery, for she conceals her true lawlessness, abominations, and harlotries against Christ under the veneer of being a Christian Church (in fact, claiming to be the one, holy, apostolic Christian Church).

B. Let us next consider the presence and gradual growth of “the mystery of lawlessness.”

1. Paul states that the mystery of lawlessness (in doctrine, worship, and government) was already working in the Visible Church in his time (2 Thessalonians 2:7). The seeds of the papacy were sown in Paul’s time, which would germinate below the surface and which would eventually grow into a full-grown tree, manifesting the Lawless One, the Papal Antichrist.

2. Note how the mystery of lawlessness was working in the age of the apostles. There were many antichrists who arose from within the Church (1 John 2:18). There were false teachers who secretly sowed their evil seed of lawlessness and licentiousness from within the Church (Jude 4). From within the

Church arose idolaters (1 Corinthians 10:7). There were those within the Church who worshipped angels as mediators (Colossians 2:18). There were those within the Church who corrupted and handled the Word of God deceitfully (2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2). There were those who used the Christian ministry to establish a lavish kingdom of wealth (1 Timothy 6:5; Titus 1:11). Certain ones from within the Church promoted a superstitious observation of feast days and holydays not appointed in the New Covenant (Galatians 4:10). There were those who viewed not eating meats to be more holy (Romans 14); those who like monks neglected the body (Colossians 2:23); those who followed the tradition of men (Colossians 2:8), i.e. the commandments and doctrines of men (Colossians 2:22); and those like Diotrephes who lifted themselves up in pre-eminence over even the apostles by way of their unlawful decrees and excommunications (3 John 9-10). All these were forerunners of The Lawless One, the Papal Antichrist. This “mystery of lawlessness” present in the times of the apostles would eventually lead to the Great Apostasy from within the Visible Church from which would arise the Antichrist.

C. Finally, under this first main point I would have you note that just as there is “the mystery of lawlessness” (here in 2 Thessalonians 2:7), so there is “the mystery of godliness” (in 1 Timothy 3:16). In fact, “the mystery of lawlessness” is the satanic counterfeit to “the mystery of godliness”.

1. For just as “the mystery of godliness” addresses the gradual development of godliness under various types, figures, and shadows in the Old Testament until reaching full realization in God who was manifest in the flesh, so “the mystery of lawlessness” addresses the gradual development of lawlessness under the disguise of teachers and prophets who claim to represent Christ, and yet who introduce all manner of heresy, blasphemy, idolatry, and tyranny into the Church of Christ until reaching full realization in Antichrist (Satan’s counterfeit to Christ).

2. Antichrist sits as head within the Visible Church in imitation of Christ as Head (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Antichrist is worshipped and given an absolute obedience like Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Antichrist claims infallibility like Christ. Antichrist assumes the titles, offices, and prerogative of Christ. Antichrist (according to Daniel 7:25) changes times (introducing new holydays) and laws (prohibiting meat and marriage) like Christ. Antichrist claims power to forgive sins like Christ. Antichrist claims the power to perform miracles like Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Thus, “the mystery of lawlessness” and the Lawless One are the satanic counterfeit at every turn for “the mystery of godliness” and the Righteous One, God manifest in the flesh.

II. The Restrainer Revealed and Removed (“Only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way” (2 Thessalonians 2:7b)).

A. The Antichrist would have been revealed much earlier in history than he was, but Paul states there was something and someone that restrained Antichrist from being fully revealed in all of his lawless usurpation of Christ’s titles, offices, authority, and prerogatives. What and who was the restrainer? Paul did not specifically state what and who the Restrainer was, however, the specific identity of the Restrainer was known to both Paul and to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:5-6).

1. First, the restrainer is both a **what** and a **who** (i.e. both a something and a someone).
a. As a **what**, the Restrainer is something that restrains Antichrist from being revealed in Paul’s time (“And now ye know WHAT WITHHOLDETH that he [i.e. The Lawless One, Antichrist—GLP] might be revealed in his time” 2 Thessalonians 2:6). “What withholdeth” is in the neuter gender, expressing that the Restrainer is a something.

b. However, as a **who**, the Restrainer is someone who restrains Antichrist from being revealed in Paul’s time (“Only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way”

2 Thessalonians 2:7). “He who letteth” is in the masculine gender, expressing that the Restrainer is a someone. Though the English translation in the Authorized Version uses two different words (“what withholdeth” in 2 Thessalonians 2:6, and “he who letteth” in 2 Thessalonians 2:7), they are exactly the same Greek word, the only difference being that one is used in the neuter gender and the other is used in the masculine gender. Thus, we would be more accurate to translate 2 Thessalonians 2:6 as, “And now ye know what restraineth”, and to translate 2 Thessalonians 2:7 as, “Only he who now restraineth”. Thus, the Restrainer must be both a **what** and a **who**—a **something** and a **someone**.

c. Even though Paul identified the Restrainer to the Thessalonians Christians when he visited them (2 Thessalonians 2:5-6), he mysteriously avoids putting the identity of the Restrainer in writing. Why? Because Paul states that the Restrainer would be taken out of the way (and then the Lawless One or Antichrist would be revealed). This implies that the Restrainer would be forcibly moved out of the way in order to make way for the powerful Antichrist. It seems reasonable that if this Restrainer was powerful enough to keep Antichrist from being revealed and manifesting his power to the world for a time, that the Restrainer was also powerful enough to attack and persecute the Church as well. Thus, it seems very reasonable that the reason for concealing the identity of the Restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2 was to protect the Church from the powerful reprisals of this Restrainer. So we learn from Paul (by what he writes and by what he does not write) that the Restrainer is both a what and a who (a something and a someone), and is likely a very powerful Restrainer, who hinders Antichrist from coming to full power at the time that Paul was writing 2 Thessalonians.

2. Who is the Restrainer? The Restrainer is most likely the Roman Empire (as to the what and as to the something), and is the Roman Emperor (as to the who and as to the someone). This likely explains why Paul would tell the Thessalonians in word when he was present with them what and who the Restrainer was, but would not include this information in a letter to them. For the Roman Empire and the Rome Emperor could powerfully seek further reprisals and persecution against the Church (which it had already done under Nero and was doing under Domitian), if it became common knowledge that Christians believed that the Roman Empire and Roman Emperor would be forcibly removed from their place of power sometime in the future. In fact, it would likely be viewed as treasonous. There are two lines of testimony that support this view that the Roman Empire was the what that restrained Antichrist and that the Roman Emperor was the who that restrained Antichrist.

a. First, biblical testimony in Daniel 7 supports the identity of the Roman Empire and Roman Emperor being the Restrainer of Antichrist.

(1) In Daniel 7, four figurative Beasts are revealed as vicious Empires that would rule over God’s people throughout history from that time forward (until the final Beast is destroyed by Christ before the initiation of the millennial reign of Christ over the earth from the right hand of God in heaven, Revelation 19:19-20). Those four Beasts (or Empires) are identified as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome (Daniel 7:1-10).

(2) The fourth Beast (Rome) would become divided by ten horns (or 10 barbarian kingdoms in Europe) and from that division and desolation of the Roman Empire would arise the Little Horn (Daniel 7:7-8). This Little Horn has been identified in previous sermons as the Papacy and Papal Kingdom of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, Daniel’s prophecy reveals that Antichrist and his kingdom would be restrained by the Roman Empire, but when the Roman Empire would be removed from its place of authority due to the sword and devastation of these ten barbarian kingdoms, then the Papal Antichrist (the Little Horn) would be fully revealed in its power and authority.

(3) This was historically realized when the barbarian kingdom of the Heruli (under Odoacer) imposed a mortal wound to the rule of the Roman Emperor in Rome when he deposed Emperor Romulus Augustus in 476. For 324 years, there was no Roman Emperor seated in the West (until Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Roman Empire in 800). The Papal Antichrist was then free to

completely fill the vacuum left by the absence of a Roman Emperor in Rome for 324 years. From that date (476), the Papal Antichrist grew in power and authority over the next thousand years until he attained a power equivalent to (if not greater than) the kings and emperors of the Revived Roman Empire in Europe. Had the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor retained their seat and throne in Rome, the Roman Bishop (Papal Antichrist) would have not reached the powerful position that he ultimately reached. Rome could not have had two heads, both claiming and exercising supreme power; and The Lawless One (the Papal Antichrist) would have continued to be restrained by the powerful Roman Empire and Roman Emperor.

b. Second, early historical testimony also supports this identity of the Restrainer. As a brief representative list, I note the following.

(1) Tertullian (160-225).

He who now hinders must hinder until he be taken out of the way. What obstacle is there but the Roman state; the falling away of which, by being scattered into ten kingdoms, shall introduce antichrist (Tertullian's treatise, *On the Resurrection*, Chapters 24, 25. Quoted in *Romanism and the Reformation*, by H. Grattan Guinness, p. 106).

(2) Chrysostom (347-407)

'He who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way,' that is, *when the Roman Empire is taken out of the way, then he [Antichrist—GLP] shall come*; and naturally, for as long as the fear of *this empire* lasts, no one will readily exalt himself; but when that is dissolved, he [Antichrist—GLP] will attack the anarchy, and endeavor to seize upon the government both of men and of God (John Chrysostom's *Homily IV*, "On 2 Thessalonians ii." Quoted in *Romanism and the Reformation*, by H. Grattan Guinness, pp. 106-107).

(3) Augustine (354-430)

It is not absurd to believe that these words of the apostle, 'Only he who now holdeth, let him hold until he be taken out of the way,' refer to the Roman empire (Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 20, Chapter 19, paragraph 3).

c. Dear ones, this biblical and historical interpretation of the Restrainer likewise provides further support that the true identity of Antichrist in Paul's descriptive "photo" is the Papacy. For who else historically was restrained from coming to full power from within the Church to sit as head of the Visible Church in receiving worship and absolute obedience and in usurping the titles, offices, authority, and prerogatives of Christ (as God and Mediator)? Only the Papacy was so restrained by the Roman Empire and Roman Emperor until the ten barbarian kingdoms ended that restraint, which permitted the Papacy to come to full power and authority.

B. Although many Futurists interpret the Restrainer to be the Holy Spirit or to be the Church in 2 Thessalonians 2, I submit this cannot be the case for the following reasons.

1. Futurists teach this order of events: (1) Christ returns and gathers the Church to Himself in the sky, at which time the Holy Spirit is removed from restraining the Antichrist; (2) Then comes the Great Apostasy and the revelation of the Antichrist. However, Paul teaches this order of events: (1) The Great Apostasy; (2) From the Great Apostasy comes the Antichrist; (3) Sometime after that comes the bodily Second Coming of Christ when Christians are gathered to Christ. Thus, neither the Church nor the Holy Spirit within

the Church are the Restrainer of Antichrist, for the Church is not gathered to Christ until after Antichrist is fully revealed.

2. Why would Paul be so mysterious about the Restrainer if it was either the Church or the Holy Spirit? Fear of reprisals from the Roman Emperor is a reasonable explanation for Paul's mysterious silence about Rome being the Restrainer of Antichrist, but no similar explanation is forthcoming if the Church or Holy Spirit were actually the Restrainer.

III. The Lawless Antichrist Revealed and Destroyed (2 Thessalonians 2:8-9).

A. I simply note that Paul not only teaches that Antichrist will be revealed after the mystery of lawlessness has run its concealed course, after the mystery of lawlessness leads to the Great Apostasy, and after the Great Apostasy leads to the Lawless One (the Papal Antichrist), but Paul also teaches that Christ will consume and destroy Antichrist (just as He will also destroy the Civil Beast and the False Prophet in Revelation 19:19-20). I will describe Antichrist's destruction at the same time that I address the destruction of the Beast and False Prophet, which will be the concluding sermon on these three great enemies of Christ.

B. Dear ones, as I close, you may ask, How is it that so many are deceived by the Papal Antichrist and fall under God's everlasting judgment? I submit to you Paul's answer to that question is given in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12. The two grounds for so many being given over by God to delusion and then being judged are these: (1) They did not believe the truth of the Gospel; and (2) They took pleasure in unrighteousness.

They prefer this system of error and delusion to the simple and pure Gospel of justification by faith alone in the righteousness of Christ alone. Dear ones, to take pleasure in unrighteousness is to take pleasure in your own righteousness rather than in the righteousness of Christ alone for your justification. Rejoice that you are not deluded, that you are resting in Christ and His righteousness alone for your justification before God (now and for all eternity). Why did you receive the Gospel and deny trusting in your own righteousness? It was entirely due to God's amazing grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

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