

## CHAPTER 4

# WHO IS RESTRAINING THE ANTICHRIST?

A SURVEY OF FOUR MAJOR VIEWS



As Paul corrects the false claim that the day of the Lord had already come, he introduces one of the most debated elements in biblical eschatology: the Restrainer. What later readers find puzzling and obscure was once familiar to the Thessalonian believers. They had heard Paul explain these matters in person (2 Thess 2:5). We do not share that advantage. Nearly two thousand years later, we rely on his written words, without the fuller oral instruction that once clarified them.

Paul's brevity has left theologians and commentators wrestling with a central question: *Who is restraining the antichrist?* Paul uses the Greek participle *katechōn*, a term meaning "to hold back," "restrain," or "suppress" (BDAG, 532). In verse 6, he employs the neuter form (*to katechon*). In verse 7, however, he uses the masculine form (*ho katechōn*). This grammatical shift has led many interpreters to conclude that the Restrainer is both an impersonal force and a personal agent that temporarily holds back the unveiling of the man of lawlessness.

Yet despite these clues, Paul never explicitly identifies the Restrainer. As a result, interpreters across the centuries have struggled to reach a consensus. Augustine of Hippo famously admitted, “I frankly confess that the meaning of this passage completely escapes me” (*City* 20.19). His honesty reflects the difficulty of the text, but it has not stopped others from offering explanations.

Throughout church history, several major views have emerged. In this chapter, we will examine four plausible interpretations: (1) the Roman Empire and its emperor, (2) the gospel and Paul’s apostolic mission, (3) the Holy Spirit working through the church, and (4) the Archangel Michael. Each view attempts to account for Paul’s language and the broader context of Scripture, and each offers important insights into this enduring mystery.<sup>1</sup>

## **View 1: The Roman Empire and Its Emperor**

One of the oldest and most influential interpretations of the Restrainer identifies it with the Roman Empire and, more specifically, with its ruling emperor (Bruce 1982, 188; Stott 1991, 140–141). According to this view, Rome’s political and legal system functioned as a barrier against widespread lawlessness and thereby delayed the rise of the man of lawlessness.

Advocates point to the grammatical shifts in 2 Thessalonians 2. The phrase “what is restraining” in verse 6 uses a neuter form and is taken to refer to the impersonal structure of the empire. The phrase “he who now restrains” in verse 7 uses a masculine form and is understood as pointing to the emperor, who embodied that restraining authority in personal form.

This interpretation was widely held in the early church. Tertullian, writing around AD 200, identified the Restrainer as the Roman Empire. Other influential figures, including Chrysostom and Augustine, expressed similar views. They believed that Rome’s continued existence preserved social order and delayed the final outbreak of rebellion.

From a historical standpoint, this interpretation is plausible. Despite its pagan religion and later imperial claims to divinity, the Roman Empire did provide a measure of stability in the ancient world. Its road system enabled travel, its legal framework promoted order, and the Pax Romana created conditions that allowed the gospel to spread rapidly. In this sense, Rome could be viewed as a force that restrained chaos, even while remaining morally compromised.

Some scholars also suggest that Paul's lack of specificity was intentional. Explicitly identifying Rome as the Restrainer could have been dangerous in a context where political criticism was easily construed as treason. Paul's careful language may therefore reflect pastoral wisdom aimed at protecting the Thessalonian believers. This interpretation accounts for Paul's guarded wording in a politically sensitive environment.

At the same time, this view faces several challenges. The Western Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century. If Rome was the Restrainer, why has the man of lawlessness not yet appeared? The long interval between Rome's fall and the present day creates a significant difficulty.

There is also the issue of Paul's own ambivalent experience with Roman power. At times, Roman authorities protected him (Acts 18:12–17). At other times, they imprisoned and beat him (Acts 16:19–24). Moreover, in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, Paul warns against trusting slogans of “peace and security,” language often associated with Roman propaganda. This caution suggests that Paul did not view imperial power as a reliable moral safeguard.

Other biblical texts further complicate the picture. The book of Revelation portrays the final world empire as an instrument of deception and oppression that serves the purposes of the antichrist (Rev 13:16–18). This portrayal sits uneasily with the idea that Rome, or any global empire, plays a redemptive role in restraining evil at the end of history.

In response to these difficulties, some interpreters propose a broader version of the view. Rather than identifying the Restrainer with Rome alone, they argue that Paul refers to the general principle of civil government.

Drawing on Romans 13, they suggest that human governments, wherever they exist, function as God-ordained restraints on lawlessness. This approach avoids the problem of Rome's collapse by allowing the restraining role to continue through successive political systems.

In summary, this view explains Paul's guarded language and reflects the political realities of his historical context. However, it struggles to account for the long delay between Rome's fall and the anticipated rebellion. To remain viable, the interpretation must either be broadened to encompass civil government in general or revised to include a future revival of Rome.<sup>2</sup> Even so, it represents a serious and historically rooted attempt to identify the Restrainer and invites careful reflection on how God may use political structures, both past and future, to accomplish His purposes.

## **View 2: The Proclamation of the Gospel and Paul**

This view, often associated with the Reformers and especially with John Calvin, identifies the Restrainer as the proclamation of the gospel, particularly as it advanced through Paul's apostolic ministry (Beale 2003, 215–216; Munck 1959, 36–42). According to this interpretation, the spread of the gospel holds back the outbreak of lawlessness and delays the unveiling of the man of lawlessness. Paul himself, as a divinely appointed messenger to the nations, is seen as a central instrument through whom this restraining influence was exercised during the church's earliest years.

This understanding fits well with how Paul viewed his own calling. In Romans 11:13, he describes himself as “an apostle to the Gentiles,” set apart to carry the good news of Jesus Christ beyond Israel. For Paul, the gospel was not merely a message of personal salvation. It was a powerful weapon in God's cosmic conflict with the forces of darkness (Eph 6:17). Through his preaching, idols were exposed, spiritual strongholds were torn down, and men and women from every background were called to repentance and faith (Acts 26:16–18). Because the Thessalonian believers had personally received

the gospel through Paul, they may have understood his words, “you know what is restraining him now” (v. 6), as a reference to the truth that had transformed their own lives.

Jesus’ teaching is often cited in support of this view. For example, in the Olivet Discourse, Matthew wrote, “This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14). This statement suggests that the global spread of the gospel is closely tied to God’s timing of the end. Until the message reaches its appointed audience, the rebellion and the rise of the antichrist are delayed. In this sense, the gospel is not only redemptive. It is also restraining.

One of the strengths of this interpretation is that it avoids placing confidence in political powers or human institutions. Instead, it locates the restraining force in the advance of God’s truth, a theme that runs consistently through Acts and the epistles. As the gospel calls people out of darkness and into the light of Christ, it slows the spread of rebellion and limits the reach of evil.

At the same time, this view faces significant challenges. The most obvious is the issue of timing. Paul died before the close of the first century, yet the man of lawlessness has still not been revealed. If Paul’s ministry alone functioned as the restraining force, it is difficult to explain why the final rebellion did not erupt shortly after his death.

To address this difficulty, some interpreters broaden the scope of the view. Rather than limiting the Restrainer to Paul personally, they understand it as the wider apostolic witness. As long as the foundational gospel message was being proclaimed by those commissioned by Christ, the rebellion was held in check. Others expand the interpretation further, identifying the Restrainer with the ongoing witness of the church. In this formulation, the restraint began with Paul but continues through every generation of believers who proclaim the gospel and make disciples.

This broader application, however, encounters a grammatical challenge. In verse 7, Paul uses a masculine singular participle, “he who now restrains.” This form suggests a personal agent rather than an abstract message, a collective group, or an institution. If Paul had intended to refer to the gospel itself, the apostolic community, or the church as a whole, we might expect a neuter or plural expression instead (Weima 2014, 573). This grammatical detail raises questions about whether this interpretation fully accounts for Paul’s language.

Even so, this view offers an important theological insight. It highlights the fact that the gospel is not only God’s means of salvation, but also part of his strategy for delaying judgment. Through the spread of truth, God restrains evil, extends mercy, and gathers his people until the appointed time arrives.

### **View 3: The Holy Spirit and the Presence of the Church**

A third view, widely held among modern evangelicals and especially within dispensational circles, identifies the Restrainer as the Holy Spirit working through the presence of the church (Hiebert 1996, 339; Thomas 2006, 471; Woods 2018, 34). According to this interpretation, the Spirit restrains lawlessness by indwelling believers and empowering the church’s witness. When the church is removed from the earth at the rapture, which is assumed to occur before the tribulation, the Spirit’s restraining influence is also withdrawn. This removal then permits the man of lawlessness to be revealed.

Supporters of this view appeal to several biblical passages that portray the Holy Spirit as one who contends with sin and restrains evil (Gen 6:3; Isa 59:19; John 16:8–11; 1 John 4:4). Advocates also note that John’s Gospel and letters sometimes use both neuter and masculine forms when speaking about the Spirit (cf. John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–14). On this reading, Paul’s shift in grammatical form may point to the Spirit as both divine power and personal agent.<sup>3</sup>

Within this framework, the church functions as the Spirit's chosen instrument of restraint. As long as the church remains on earth, lawlessness is held back. When the church is removed at the rapture, the Spirit's distinctive restraining ministry through believers is lifted. Constable (1985, 719) summarizes this view as follows,

“When the church leaves the earth in the Rapture, the Holy Spirit will be taken out of the way in the sense that His unique lawlessness–restraining ministry through God’s people will be removed. The removal of the Restrainer at the time of the Rapture must obviously precede the day of the Lord. Paul’s reasoning is thus a strong argument for the pre–tribulational Rapture: the Thessalonians were not in the Great Tribulation because the Rapture had not yet occurred.”

Proponents often highlight several strengths of this view: It emphasizes the Spirit's active role in restraining evil, which fits the broader biblical witness. It resonates with the church's calling to be salt and light in the world (Matt 5:13–14). It offers an explanation for Paul's use of both impersonal and personal grammatical forms by pointing to the Spirit as both person and power.

Even so, this view faces significant challenges. Firstly, Paul's vagueness is difficult to explain. The apostle speaks openly about the Holy Spirit in other places, including in this same chapter. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13 he refers explicitly to the Spirit's sanctifying work. If Paul intended the Holy Spirit in verses 6–7, it is fair to ask why he did not say so plainly, especially since his aim is to stabilize a confused church. The absence of any explicit reference to the Spirit in these verses makes the interpretation less certain than it first appears.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the view depends on a particular end times framework. This interpretation often assumes that the rapture must occur before the man of lawlessness appears. However, Paul's sequence in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 places the rebellion and the revelation of the man of lawlessness before the day of the Lord arrives. In the context of the chapter, "that day" includes the second coming and the gathering of the saints, which Paul mentioned in verse 1. To preserve a pre-tribulational scheme, interpreters must bring assumptions to the text that are not stated clearly in the passage itself.

Thirdly, the most serious concern arises when dispensationalists explain how people can be saved during the tribulation if the Spirit's restraining ministry is removed. Advocates of this view propose that after the church is removed from the earth, the Holy Spirit will revert to his Old Testament ministry, no longer permanently indwelling believers but merely "coming upon" select individuals during the seven-year tribulation (Walvoord and Hitchcock 2012, 130). This interpretation, however, stands in contradiction with 1 Corinthians 12:13, where Paul asserts that every individual who becomes a Christian from Pentecost onward is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ.

Spirit baptism signifies the inseparable link between salvation and the indwelling of the Spirit, a point Charles Ryrie emphasizes in his book *Basic Theology* (1999, 419), "If one could be saved and not baptized [by the Spirit], he could be an out-of-body believer." Yet, in his commentary on 2 Thessalonians, Ryrie (2001, 116) appears to contradict his earlier position by suggesting that individuals living during the tribulation can be saved and not experience the indwelling of the Spirit. He asserts,

"God's universal and permanent residence in His people is a distinctive relationship in this day of grace, and certainly the removal of His residence (including those believers in whom

He resides) does not mean the withdrawal of His presence or the cessation of His activity.”

While Ryrie correctly acknowledges God’s omnipresence and continuous activity during the seven-year tribulation, he mistakenly concludes that the Holy Spirit’s residence in believers will temporarily cease at the onset of this period. This assertion is deeply problematic, as it undermines the very essence of the New Covenant, which guarantees the Spirit will permanently indwell God’s people (Ezek 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–29; 1 Cor 6:19; Eph 1:13–14). Following Christ’s death and resurrection, the Old Covenant was rendered obsolete (Heb 8:13). If God were to revert to the ways of the Old Covenant, even temporarily, it would cast serious doubt on his faithfulness and the integrity of his promises.

Under the New Covenant, all believers—living between Christ’s first and second comings—experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit and are thus incorporated into the church. This foundational truth remains constant, regardless of differing views on the timing of the rapture. Therefore, it is inconsistent to assert that a Christian could be in Christ without being a part of his body, even during the tribulation.

The view that the Holy Spirit working through the church is the Restrainer remains one of the most popular explanations in contemporary evangelical theology. It rightly emphasizes the Spirit’s role in restraining evil and highlights the church’s witness in the world. It also provides a coherent model within the dispensational framework.

At the same time, the weaknesses are substantial. The view relies heavily on a particular end times structure that is not clearly established in this passage. It reads the Holy Spirit into Paul’s ambiguous language without a clear antecedent in the text. It also introduces a view of salvation during the tribulation that appears difficult to reconcile with the New Testament’s teaching on the Spirit’s indwelling and the continuity of the New Covenant.

### **View 4: The Activity and Person of the Archangel Michael**

A fourth interpretation, gaining traction among many contemporary scholars, suggests that the Restrainer is none other than the Archangel Michael (Gupta 2016, 136; Nicholl 2004, 225–249; Weima 2014, 532). Throughout the Bible, Michael, the special guardian of Israel, appears as a leading angelic figure in God’s cosmic battle against evil (e.g., Rev 12:7–9). His angelic role offers a meaningful backdrop for Paul’s cryptic reference to “the one who now restrains” until the appointed time.

According to this view, the neuter participle in verse 6 refers to the act of his restraint, while the masculine participle in verse 7 refers to Michael himself as the personal agent behind it. This grammatical alternation is not unusual in the New Testament. Similar shifts occur in the Gospel of John (cf. John 14:26; 16:13–14).

The strongest support for this view comes from the book of Daniel, where Michael is portrayed as a spiritual warrior standing against the demonic powers that influence earthly empires. In Daniel 10:13, 20–21, Michael contends with the “prince of Persia” and the “prince of Greece,” widely understood as evil spiritual forces behind world governments. Then in Daniel 12:1, Michael “arises” (or perhaps “stands aside,” depending on the translation), triggering a time of great distress for God’s people. Jeffrey Weima (2014, 576) notes a strong parallel here with Paul’s logic in 2 Thessalonians 2:

“Michael’s role in the vision of Dan. 10–12, then, is that of one who restrains the forces of evil, similar to Paul’s depiction of the katechon/katechōn figure in 2:6–7 as one who restrains ‘the mystery of lawlessness’ already at work in the world...the context suggests that his conduct is conditional for the next event to occur: it is only after Michael ‘stands’ or ‘stands aside’

(12:1a) that unparalleled distress of God's people takes place (12:1b).”

The sequence in Daniel and 2 Thessalonians is strikingly similar: restraint → release → tribulation. This pattern is echoed again in Revelation 12:7–17, where Michael leads a heavenly battle against Satan and casts him down to earth. This unleashes a wave of persecution against the saints. Weima (2014, 576) outlines a shared four-stage chronology across Daniel and 2 Thessalonians:

1. Michael restrains evil (Dan 10:20–11:45; 2 Thess 2:6a–7a)
2. Michael's restraint ceases (Dan 12:1a; 2 Thess 2:7b)
3. Tribulation follows (Dan 12:1b; 2 Thess 2:3–4, 8–10)
4. Final judgment comes (Dan 12:1c–3; 2 Thess 2:3, 8b, 10b–12)

This close alignment suggests that Paul may have drawn from Daniel's prophetic vision in forming his own eschatological outlook. The Restrainer, then, is not simply a force or idea, but a personal being who plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of end-time events. Of course, this view is not without limitations. The most obvious is that Paul never names Michael explicitly. The connection must be made through comparison and inference. For some readers, this lack of clarity renders the view speculative.

A second concern involves Daniel 12:1, where the Hebrew verb translated “stand up” is ambiguous. While it typically means “to arise” or “to take a stand,” some argue it could also mean “to stand aside” or “withdraw.” If so, the parallel to Paul's “taken out of the way” (2 Thess 2:7) becomes even stronger. However, this interpretation of the verb is less common and not widely accepted.

Despite these cautions, this view remains a strong and compelling option. It is rooted in biblical texts, consistent with Paul's theology, and attuned to the unseen cosmic battle at the heart of redemptive history.

## Conclusion

As this survey has shown, each of the four major views brings with it interpretive strengths, theological insights, and unavoidable tensions. The diversity of interpretations highlights not only the difficulty of the text, but also the multifaceted nature of God's restraining work in history. What unites all four views is a common affirmation that evil is presently restrained by a divine agent operating according to God's appointed timeline. Yet the limitations of these traditional views also open the door for fresh inquiry. In the next chapter, we turn to explore what I call the *Recapitulation Theory*.

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1. A range of other proposals have been offered throughout church history. For a fuller survey and critical evaluation of these alternative views, see Jeffrey A. D. Weima, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 567–577.
  2. Some scholars, particularly within futurist circles, propose that the Roman Empire will be revived in the last days. Appealing to Daniel's visions of the fourth kingdom in Daniel 2 and 7, they argue that a renewed form of Rome will emerge as the final world empire and provide the platform for the antichrist's rise. On this reading, Rome functioned as the Restrainer in the past and will do so again in a transformed way in the future.
  3. In verse 6, Paul uses a neuter participle, which some connect to the neuter grammatical gender of *pneuma* ("Spirit"). In verse 7, Paul uses a masculine participle, which they take as evidence of the Spirit's personal agency.
  4. Although the grammar could allow for the Spirit as the Restrainer, Paul does not identify the Spirit as the referent anywhere in this context. The connection therefore remains inferential rather than explicit.