

Maranatha or a Protestant Purgatory?

by Jeremy James



Pentecost, Cluny Lectionary, c.1000

Believers are familiar with the term “the restrainer” which appears in chapter 2 of Second Thessalonians. The relevant Greek word is *katechō* (Strong’s G2722) which, in this context, means to hold back, hinder or restrain. The KJV translates it as “withholder” or “he who now letteth”, where “let” is an archaic English word for restrain:

“And now ye know what withholdeth [*katechō*] that he [i.e. the Antichrist] might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth [*katechō*] will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:” (2 Thessalonians 2:6-8)

Even though numerous respected commentators have identified this Person as the Holy Spirit, there are still many believers who like to explore other possibilities. Since the identity of this Person is important in the context of End Time prophecy, especially in relation to the Rapture of the Church, we would like, if possible, to remove all doubt.

The passage just quoted actually points to the answer, though this fact is often overlooked. The Apostle Paul begins by saying that the Thessalonians already knew the identity of the Restrainer – “**And now ye know what withholdeth [*katechō*] that he might be revealed in his time.**”

The Holy Spirit was poorly understood by the Jews

To appreciate the significance of this observation, we need to recall that the Holy Spirit was poorly understood by the Jews. They knew the “spirit” came from God, the Father, but they didn’t understand, as they should have, that He was a divine Person in His own right. They also failed to see that their Messiah, whose arrival they long anticipated, was also a divine Person, the actual Son of God, and not a supernatural being whose power and authority exceeded that of the angels. (The Talmudic-Kabbalistic name for such a being was ‘Metatron’.)



John the Baptist, illuminated manuscript, 15th century

We see this clearly in the episode recorded at the start of Acts chapter 19, where Paul came across “certain disciples” who had been baptized by John the Baptist. This fact would suggest that they were Jews, and yet they had never heard of the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit):

“...Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism.” (Acts 19:1-3)

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he was speaking mainly to Gentiles rather than Jews – “...of the devout Greeks a great multitude” (Acts 17:4). Jews in general had a strong antipathy to the doctrine of the Personhood of the Holy Spirit, but Gentiles did not. When he had been with them in person Paul had explained to them the role of the Holy Spirit as the Restrainer, so it was natural for him to refer to “**he who now letteth**” [the Restrainer] without stating explicitly that this was the Holy Spirit. Unlike Jewish believers, they would not think he was speaking about a powerful supernatural being, such as a high-ranking angel. (Some modern interpreters of the Bible are still drawn to this Metatron teaching and suggest that the Restrainer is the Archangel Michael.)

In volume IV of his *Systematic Theology*, L S Chafer states:

With due recognition of various opinions abroad, the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit. To achieve all that is to be accomplished, the Restrainer must be one of the Godhead [the Trinity]. Even a casual contemplation of the power required will convince the open mind of this necessity; and, since the Holy Spirit is the active Executor of the Godhead in the world during this age, it is reasonable to conclude that He it is who restrains. Doubtless His restraint operates both directly and through the Church in which He dwells. When His work of gathering out the Church is completed – that for which He came into the world – He, the Spirit, the Restrainer, will be removed from the world as resident here and reassume His position as omnipresent only...

The right understanding of this important [passage of] Scripture depends on recognition of the distinction to be observed between the Spirit's relation to the world as resident therein or omnipresent. He who was always omnipresent became resident on the Day of Pentecost; He who is now resident will become merely omnipresent on the completion of that which He came on the Day of Pentecost to achieve.

It is as clearly asserted that the believer can never be separated from the Holy Spirit. Christ's prayer, that cannot go unanswered, was that the Spirit should abide with believers forever (John 14:16); therefore, when the Spirit, the Restrainer, is “taken out of the way,” the Church will of necessity be removed with Him. It cannot be otherwise... [p.372]

Many have argued that there is no reason why the Church should not be required to go through part of the 7-year Tribulation. In doing so they are calling into question the very basis of our salvation, namely the “measureless grace of God in Christ.”

Dr Chafer cut to the heart of this objection when he said:

“Back of the theories that the Church will enter or pass through the [7-year] tribulation is the Arminian heresy that the believer contributes something to his own acceptance before God, and, having failed to some extent in this responsibility, he will be purged and purified by the suffering which the tribulation affords... This constitutes a Protestant purgatory... Thus the contention that the Church will enter or pass through the tribulation becomes an insult to, and unbelief towards, the measureless grace of God in Christ.”

[p.365]

For disbelieving ‘believers’ who still cling to a Protestant purgatory, it will help if we expand on the role of the Holy Spirit in this age, the Age of Grace.

Addressing Intemperate Remarks about the Pre-Tribulation Rapture

by Jeremy James



#306

**Previous papers in this series:
81, 91, 199, 265, and 306.**

The Holy Spirit in the Age of Grace

As Dr Chafer stated, “the Holy Spirit is the active Executor of the Godhead in the world during this age.” We need to understand the mission of the Comforter. Perhaps the most descriptive account of this is given by Jesus himself in John 16:7-11:

“Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.” (John 16:7-11)

It is the task of the Holy Spirit to “**reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment**”. The word translated “reprove” is *elegchō* (Strong’s G1651), which can mean to convict, refute, correct, expose, reprove or admonish. His mission is to convince or impress upon mankind the overarching spiritual reality of three great facts – sin, righteousness, and judgment. The word for judgment in the Greek is *krisis* (Strong’s G2920), which is generally understood to mean a determination as to whether something is right or wrong and, if the latter, the necessary punishment.

Remarkably, Jesus goes on to explain what he means by each part of this tripartite mission. It’s as though he wants to make absolutely sure that humanity fully understands the role of the Holy Spirit on earth in the coming age.



An astrologer looks at the night sky while summoning a demon inside a magic circle. England, 14th century.

The Holy Spirit convicts mankind of three spiritual facts

The Holy Spirit has come to convict mankind of these three facts, to break down the obstinate refusal by our fallen nature to acknowledge their existence. We are saved only by accepting that we are lost sinners, that we are unable of ourselves to attain the standard of righteousness ordained by God, and that we will be held to account for our actions on the Day of Judgment. These are the same three facts which the Children of Wickedness angrily reject. They refuse to acknowledge the existence of sin; they refuse to accept that they are bound by any standard of righteousness; and they despise the notion that God has any right to judge them.

Let's look at each in turn.

The Holy Spirit is not convicting us of our individual sins, but of sin itself, and the ultimate sin is the rejection of Christ, the Son of God. This is the sin which condemns to damnation all who persist in it. As Jesus said, **“Of sin, because they believe not on me.”**

The Holy Spirit is also pointing all souls continually to Christ, convicting them of the righteousness which is found only in the risen Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father: **“Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more.”** None of the ‘righteousness’ that we possess of ourselves is of any value, and in our fallen state it is vital that we see this. The Holy Spirit does this convicting on behalf of Christ, who is no longer residing on the earth.

Now we come to the fact which has the most direct bearing on our theme, namely the Holy Spirit as the Restrainer. This is the judgement of the prince of this world, Satan himself. We tend to think of Calvary as an event with eternal implications for all mankind, the saved and the lost, but we forget that Satan was also judged on Calvary. He committed an appalling crime against the Father and the Son of God. In doing so he left himself open to divine judgement. When Jesus rose from the dead, Satan's fate was sealed: **“Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.”**



Detail from *Judgment Day* by Fra Angelico, c.1431

Once the prince of this world came under divine judgement, he was thereafter bound by whatever conditions were imposed by the court of heaven until his sentence is carried out, to wit his consignment in due course to the Lake of Fire. Despite appearances, he cannot do all that he wants to do here on earth. If he could, the entire earth would be in upheaval and chaos. The Comforter, in His role as Executor, ensures that limits or restraints are placed on his insane ambitions. Thus, we can see from this passage that Scripture explicitly identifies the Holy Spirit as the Restrainer.

Once the Restrainer is removed from the earth, Satan has seven years to do as he pleases. The only divinely appointed impediment that he has to deal with is the opposition of the Two Witnesses who, for three and a half years, frustrate his attempts to take complete control of Jerusalem and the newly constructed Temple. He will also be greatly angered by the evangelical work of the 144,000 Jewish converts who, having been sealed by the Holy Spirit, are immune to assassination.

The principle of Imminence

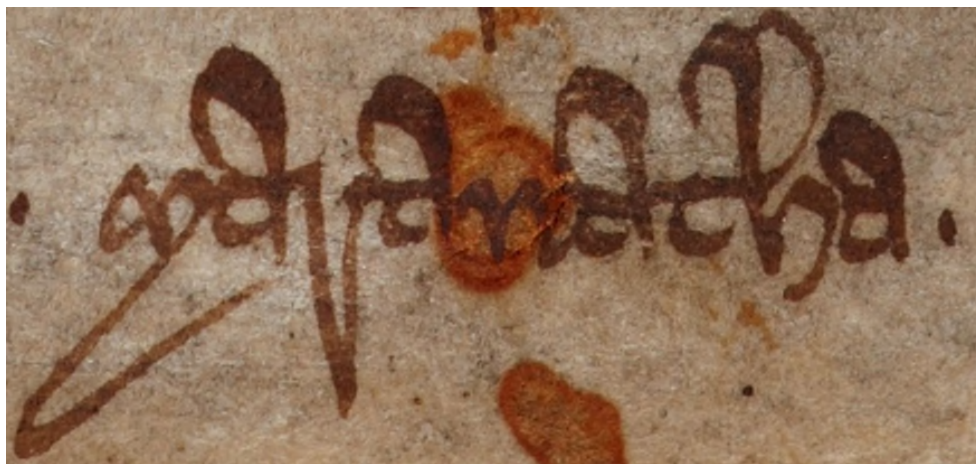
Before we conclude this paper it will help to address a few related issues. One of these is the principle of Imminence. Many in Christ today are unfamiliar with this term, which is unfortunate because it encapsulates the “**blessed hope**” of Titus 2:13. The principle states that Jesus can return for his Church at any time. With one exception (the death of the Apostle Peter), the Word of God never specifies a prophesied event or future condition which must be satisfied before he returns. On no fewer than four occasions in the Book of Revelation Jesus himself said, “**Behold [or surely] I come quickly.**” Three of these are found in the final chapter.



An aerial view of the island of Patmos

The Greek word for “quickly” in these four verses is *tachy* (Strong G5035) which can mean quickly or suddenly. In his message to John our Lord would seem to want to ensure that all of his flock would know beyond doubt that his next appearance would be “sudden” or unannounced. It will not be preceded by a sign or an event which tells believers that he is about to appear.

All Christians in the early church, up to the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, believed without question in the principle of Imminence. As the institutional church increased in power, the principle was gradually pushed aside. Christians were encouraged to look, not to the return of Christ, but to the triumphal evangelization of the entire earth. The Pope, in turn, was increasingly seen as the vicar or representative of Christ on earth, thereby leading believers away from the expectation of our Lord’s imminent return.



The word 'Maranatha' in a medieval manuscript.

These early believers made frequent use of the word *Maranatha* to express the joy they found in the imminent return of Christ. Various documents from that era show how often this word was used in prayer and worship and, seemingly, in greetings between believers. It is a little surprising that an Aramaic word should be so widely accepted in the Greek-speaking world, especially as it appears only once in the Bible: **“If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha.” (1 Corinthians 16:22).**

Some scholars believe the early Christians, during times of persecution, used to identify one another by whispering, “*Maranatha*.” No-one else in the Greek-speaking world would have known what it meant, while a Christian would have recognized it immediately.

The word *Maranatha* would appear to consist of three Aramaic words: *mar*, meaning ‘Lord’, *ana* meaning ‘our’, and *tha* meaning ‘come’. Thus, taken together, they mean, “Our Lord, come!” This exactly captures the sense of the Greek text in Revelation 22:20: **“He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”**

What a remarkable verse! Jesus is saying that he will come suddenly, without warning, and adds the word, *Amen* – “Verily, it is so!” – while John adds to this his Maranatha request, *Come, Lord Jesus!* The inclusion by Jesus of the word *Amen* is also significant since he had earlier used this word, in Revelation 3:14, to refer to himself: “**These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God...**”

Amen

The Blue Letter Bible website states:

The word "amen" is a most remarkable word. It was transliterated directly from the Hebrew into the Greek of the New Testament, then into Latin and into English and many other languages, so that it is practically a universal word. It has been called the best known word in human speech. The word is directly related – in fact, almost identical – to the Hebrew word for "believe" (aman), or faithful. Thus, it came to mean "sure" or "truly", an expression of absolute trust and confidence.

To this we add a most important detail, namely that Jesus used this word as a reference to himself, as one of his personal names. All ‘Amens’ point to ‘The Amen.’

So, from all of this we can see that the early church – which surely understood the Word of God better than any succeeding church – was thoroughly immersed in the profound spiritual truth that Jesus could return at any moment.

What is more, they knew the Church was not destined for wrath but had been delivered from condemnation by the blood of Christ.

For them, the “blessed hope” did not carry any taint of uncertainty. It could just as easily have been called the “blessed promise” since all of the promises of God are certain.

Our helmet, the hope of salvation

It is important today that believers protect their minds from any uncertainty in this matter. The Enemy wants to shake our faith in the perfection and sufficiency of the work of grace which Christ performed on Calvary. He wants, by various clever devices, to induce men to think that there is still some small thing they must do to secure their salvation, some pain or suffering they must endure to finally satisfy God’s uncompromising righteousness. But this is a great lie! There is NOTHING we can do. Jesus paid it all. And all means all.

We protect our minds, as the Apostle Paul told us, by putting on the “**helmet of salvation**” (**Isaiah 59:17** and **Ephesians 6:17**). However, speaking of the *Parousia* (the Greek word for the Second Coming) in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul used a slightly different wording: “**a helmet, the hope of salvation.**” (**1 Thessalonians 5:8**). Just as a helmet protects our head, the *hope* of salvation, with its perfect certainty, protects our mind.

Just like the believers in the early church, we must rest securely in this certainty and encourage one another as the hour draws nigh.



CONCLUSION

We will close with a definitive proof that the Church will be in heaven before the 7-year Tribulation commences.

The following verses from chapters 4, 5 and 6 of the Book of Revelation depict the scene around the heavenly throne leading up to the moment where the Lamb takes the scroll or title deed [“the book”] from the right hand of his Father and breaks the first seal:

4:2 And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne...

4:4 And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold...

4:10-11 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created...

5:2 And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? ...

5:5 And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof..

5:8-10 And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

6:1-2 And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

We'll now itemise the salient details in these wonderful verses:

1. At the point where the elders cast their crowns before the throne, the 7-year Tribulation has not yet begun. We know this is the case because the Lamb does not open any of the seals until verse 6:1. The 7-year Tribulation cannot begin until the first seal is opened.
2. The “elders” seated around the throne are clothed in white and wear crowns of gold. They have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb **“out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation”**. Christ died to redeem humans, not angels. These are clearly redeemed human beings. As such they are saints in heaven, in very large numbers. Since each is wearing a crown of gold on his head, he has been judged by the Lamb and received his reward.
3. No saint is judged or receives a “crown of gold” until the Last Day: **“...the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.” (John 12:48)**.
4. If we put fact #1 together with facts #2 and #3, we can see that the Resurrection/Rapture has already taken place, but the 7-year Tribulation has not yet begun.

What can we say to professing Christians who refuse to accept this and continue to believe in a ‘Protestant purgatory’? -

“He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.”

(Revelation 22:11-12)

The Holy Spirit is restraining the powers of darkness and the forces of chaos on this earth and will continue to do so until such time as He is called back to heaven by our Father, taking the Church, the Bride of Christ, with Him.

Great is His Mercy!

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