

The Mystery of Iniquity

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians explains a factor in the World Condition that was limited in their day, but would be a Major Factor as the End-Time approached.

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Among the passages in the King James Version of the Bible, one verse in particular tends to focus a believer's mind to the spiritual condition that plays into what motivates society. While it was a matter known in their day, it was a situation that was being held within certain operational limitations. That was something they might not have known.

Nor would we necessarily hold the same regard for the matter as we do except for the way that Paul described it. Had he not made a point of the relevance of the condition in a time to come, we might not see the event's prophetic importance. His explanation is especially insightful as it regards our day. We might say, "Hasn't there always been lawlessness? What's so different today? And, what exactly is meant by the term "mystery of iniquity?"

Iniquity is Lawlessness

We know from the passage Paul's letter that the mystery of iniquity was a factor to deal with in their belief system. In fact, much of their world was steeped in various philosophies and deceptive religious practices. It wasn't just the existence of the phenomenon, Paul's point was that in the end-time, there would be an overwhelming increase in the outpouring of the condition, to a far greater degree than anything they were anticipating.

Let's look at what Paul explained to the brethren in Thessalonica with certain points hilited. This is from 2nd Thessalonians chapter 2. [1] *"Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him,*

[2] *That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.*

[3] *Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a **falling away first**, and that **man of sin be revealed**, the son of perdition;*

[4] *Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.*

[5] *Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?*

[6] *And now ye know **what withholdeth** that he might be revealed in his time.*

[7] *For the **mystery of iniquity** doth already work: **only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.***

[8] *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:*

[9] *Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,*

[10] *And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.*

[11] *And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie:*

[12] *That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness."*

Something is Withholding

The verse that is key to Paul's message is verse 7. The verse prior helps us understand verse 7, telling us that there is something restraining (withholding) a person who is to be 'revealed' just prior to the end-time. He then goes on to describe the actions of that person. The emergence of 'that Wicked person' is a close precursor to the Second Coming of Christ, Who will then destroy him. We can discern with certainty that this is a prophecy that explains the end-time situation from verses 1 and 8. This Wicked individual will be spectacularly destroyed in the Second Coming.

It appears that the Thessalonian congregation had some perceptions about what they believed would be the imminence of the Second coming. Rumors were becoming frequent and urgent. They thought

it would be very soon, not realizing that a number of key events would have to happen first.

Paul lays out a general sequence of events that they should be aware of. And, how did Paul know? He obviously was aware of prophecies that say what he had reminded them of. He'd explained these things to them previously, as we see in verse 5.

Understandable Anticipation

It isn't hard to see how they might draw a conclusion as to the imminence of the Second Coming. World conditions in their day, with the Roman oppressions, persecutions and rampant false religious ideas could easily be seen as fulfilling certain aspects of relevant prophecies. In fact, it was the religious climate that was more the basis of their speculations. Paul alluded to that in verse 7, where he says that 'mystery' was already working, but he realized it didn't rise to the level then that it will some day.

Paul also refers to another situation, the 'falling away' [v.3] that would become evident. That serious erosion of Faith would precede the Second Coming. That's what would set the stage for our expectation of the emergence of this "man of sin".

An Active Rumor Mill

Rumors were flying around, from within the group, from 'respected' sources, some even in letters reportedly to have come from 'apostolic' sources. [v.2] All of that notwithstanding, Paul admonished them that there are to be specific indicators of the imminence of the Second Coming that they and we need to remain aware of.

Paul is telling them that there is a Force withholding this important emergence. That Force is spiritual! Though some degree of it was obvious even then, and through history, there is to be a release of the restraints upon that "mystery of iniquity" at the appropriate time. What they needed to realize is that it wasn't imminent then, not as they supposed.

Key Prophecies

But, HOW did Paul know for sure? Being an educated scholar, taught under the tutelage of Gamaliel, a renowned teacher of his day, Paul no doubt would have known those Old Testament

prophecies that tell of the world scene that would be the case just prior to the Second Coming.

Judging from the description of the man of sin that we read in verses 8 thru 10, it's apparent that Paul knew of the description of the end-time conditions described in Daniel 11:36-39. While Revelation 13 affirms the same, that was written after Paul's time.

Paul was aware of Jesus' statements regarding Daniel 11, particularly as it regards the Abomination of Desolation and the prominent political / religious individuals that will emerge in the short time just before the Second Coming. Paul briefly described them (one in particular) to the Saints at Thessalonica.

Daniel's Account

This is how Daniel described him: "*And arms shall stand on his part, and they shall pollute the sanctuary of strength, and shall take away the daily sacrifice, and they shall place the **abomination that maketh desolate.***"¹

[32] *And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he corrupt by flatteries: but the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.*

[33] *And they that understand among the people shall instruct many: yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by spoil, many days.*

[34] *Now when they shall fall, they shall be holpen with a little help: but many shall cleave to them with flatteries.*"²

[35] *And some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed.*

[36] *And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done.*

[37] *Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall **magnify himself above all.***

¹ The Disciples and early New Testament writers would have been aware of Jesus' admonition, also indicating to later followers that this passage has specific end-time application.

² This section of the prophecy explains the dynamic of the 'falling away' that Paul refers to in 2nd Thess. 2:3.

[38] *But in his estate shall he honour the God of forces: and a **god whom his fathers knew not** shall he honour with gold, and silver, and with precious stones, and pleasant things.*

[39] *Thus shall he do in the most strong holds with a **strange god**, whom he shall acknowledge and increase with glory: and he shall cause them to rule over many, and shall divide the land for gain."*

Translationally Awkward

It's especially unfortunate that the KJV translators chose the words that they did in translating 2nd Thessalonians 2 verse 7. It's the word 'letteth' that causes some confusion. While 'to let' in old English meant something different than it does today. The word 'withholdeth' in verse 6 is Strong's #2722. The place in verse 7 that we read 'letteth' is the same Strong's #2722. But there, it's translated differently. The second 'will let' doesn't appear in the text, that's why it's in *italic*.

Holding Back Dark Forces

Now, we could say that the Holy Spirit is 'letting' what's happening happen, but currently under limitations. With that understanding, the translation might convey the intended meaning. However we might want to look at it, the sense must be that there's a restraining force being applied to hinder the fullest development of the 'mystery of iniquity'!

The New King James translates the passage this way: "*And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time.*

[7] *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.* (note the capital H)

[8] *And then the **lawless one** will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming."*

The NKJ translates 'withholdeth' as restraining, and 'letteth' as restrains. Now, the remaining question is who is to be taken out of the way? Is it the restraining Force that's to be removed, or is it the Wicked individual who is to emerge out from obscurity? There's a difference of opinion on that. Some in the past have suggested that the 'he' being revealed in verse 6 is the same individual to be 'taken out of the way' (brought out into the open) (the Greek word #3319 in verse 7 could also mean 'from among'), thus that possible meaning.

The thing is, the removal of the restraining Force (the Holy Spirit) allows the man of sin to emerge onto the modern scene in a state of full **unrestraint**.

The Moffatt Translation words it this way: "*Well, you can recall now what it is that restrains him from being revealed before his appointed time.*

[7] *For the secret force of lawlessness is at work already; only, it cannot be revealed till he who at present restrains it is removed.*

[8] *Then shall the Lawless One be revealed, ..."*


Moderate Our Expectations

The overriding intent of what Paul admonished the Thessalonians about was that they not be overly focused on the immanency of the Second Coming. Premature predictions have occurred throughout our generations. World conditions from generation to generation have caused believers to 'see' the Second Coming as just ahead. Our lesson from this is that the matter is in God's hands, but that we should still be cognizant of the conditions that will initiate the lead-up to the event we all anticipate. Our question is, exactly what is it we should be anticipating?

Those conditions are a significant fading-back from the belief system as originally presented by the apostles and prophets of old. "*...And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;*" (Eph.2:20) Perverted truths are everywhere!

Of course, we could cite numerous times in history when the truth was perverted and / or believers went soft. Some have identified the apostasy situation of the early 1990's as being the fulfillment of the 'falling away', but Paul's message and Daniel's prophecy ³ shows it will be particularly evident right before the time of the Second Coming.

The next significant indicator would be the dramatic increase in evil and lawlessness and suppression of truth. And, as we know, that situation will usher-in a focus on Commandment keepers. "*And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the **commandments** of God, and have the **testimony** of Jesus Christ."* (Rev.12:17)

These are the conditions to be watching for and to be preparing ourselves for! 

³ Daniel 11:32-35 (see page 2 above)