

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 224

The Falling Away and the Restrainer

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Episode Summary

2 Thessalonians 2:1-8 contains two enigmatic features. In the first four verses Paul takes on the false teaching, circulating in the Thessalonian church, that the Day of the Lord had already come to pass. In the process Paul tells the believers “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the *apostasia* comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.” It’s clear that the man of lawlessness is the antichrist, but what is the *apostasia*? Some translations render the Greek term “falling away,” but others have “rebellion”? Just what event is Paul talking that must occur before the revealing of the antichrist? Later in the chapter Paul mentions an impersonal “restraint” and a mysterious figure who is the “restrainer” that are holding back the events leading to the second coming. What or who could do that? This episode tackles both these difficulties.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, episode 224, “The Falling Away and the Restrainer”. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how are you doing?

MH: Pretty good. Busy as usual.

TS: Anything else going on in Mike’s world?

MH: Oh, I just handed in the manuscript for the *Demons* book that’ll be a companion volume to the *Angels* book. I have no idea when the *Demons* book will be available on Amazon, but the *Angels* one, of course, is September.

TS: Yeah, that’ll be here before you know it. And the title again is *Angels and Demons*?

MH: The one book will be something like *Angels: What the Bible Really Says About the Heavenly Host* and the other one is going to be something like *Demons: What the Bible Really Says About Evil Spirits*, or something like that. I'm not quite sure what they've decided on a subtitle. But they'll be separate books. They'll be sold at different times, but eventually they'll get married and you'll be able to get them... I'm sure Amazon will bundle them somehow. But that's a ways away.

TS: Awesome. And, of course, they'll be in Kindle format and all that good stuff?

MH: Yep, that's what Lexham is prone to do, so that's what they'll be doing.

TS: Alright. Well, Mike, what in the world are we talking about today about the falling away and the restrainer? What's going on?

MH: Believe it or not, we're actually going to tread into the realm of End Times stuff—that favorite subject of mine. All this that we're going to talk about today is in 2 Thessalonians 2. In part of the chapter, there's this phenomenon, I guess you could say, of the “falling away.” The Greek word is *apostasia*. And then that's followed up by talk about a “restrainer.” And both of these items are connected to the Day of the Lord and possibly other End Times events. So let it never be said that Mike never does eschatology [laughs]. I've just been asked about this a couple of times, and I put it on my list of topics, so here we are. Let's just read 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2. We'll read the first few verses, just to get us in here. I'm reading from ESV. We read this at the beginning of the chapter, verse 1.

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us...

Boy, isn't that a whole other subject—people masquerading as Paul and writing letters. So don't be misled by...

...a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion [*apostasia*] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ 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.

So the easy part here is that the man of lawlessness is clearly the beast or the antichrist, because if you keep reading in the chapter you hit verses 8-10, and those verses mirror very closely the book of Revelation's content about the beast (the antichrist) and his defeat by the returning Jesus. So later on in verses 8-10 of the same chapter (2 Thessalonians 2) we read this:

⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. ⁹ The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

5:00 If you're familiar with the whole Armageddon scene in the book of Revelation, it's very close here to 2 Thessalonians 2. So it's no mystery that the man of lawlessness is this figure—the beast or the antichrist. So that's the easy part.

The difficult part that we want to camp on is, what is the *apostasia*? What is the—some translations have “falling away?” ESV, of course, has “rebellion.” But what is the *apostasia*? And there's a variety of semantic nuances that we're going to be talking about in relation to this today. If you looked up *apostasia* in a good Greek lexicon like BDAG (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich), you would get English glosses like “defiance,” “rebellion,” “abandonment,” “breach of faith” (like a betrayal). All of those are legitimate ways to translate *apostasia*, and they're all sort of semantically related but they have little nuances as well. Now this is part of the difficulty: in the New Testament this term is only used twice—here in this passage (2 Thessalonians 2:3) and then Acts 21:21, and I might as well read that. That verse reads:

²¹ and they have been told about you that you [Paul] teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake [*apostasia*] Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.

So again, it's this idea of abandonment or defying something. And since it's a religious issue, “breach of faith” is a possible nuance here. Really all four of these semantic options (defiance, rebellion, abandonment, and breach of faith, i.e., betrayal), they're all operable, really—in Acts 21:21 and in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. We're going to go through some other details and then I'm going to return to how some of that discussion might help us understand this term itself. We sort of have to set it up.

Before we jump in, I do want to eliminate one option. For sure, the *apostasia* is not the rapture. 2 Thessalonians 2:1 would actually refer to that, if indeed there is a rapture. It depends how you read verses 1 and 2. Verses 1 and 2 could be read

to either refer to two different events or the same event in two different ways. Let me just read verses 1 and 2 again.

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

The question is, do the phrases “coming of the Lord Jesus Christ,” “are being gathered together to him,” and “Day of the Lord” refer to *one* event in different ways, or do we have a situation where the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the being gathered... Is that the rapture, and then that’s followed by the Day of the Lord? So you could read these passages or these two verses either way—two events or one—but if you are a person who believes the rapture, you’re naturally going to go for the two, because then you have the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, our being gathered together... People who would opt for the rapture position are going to say, “Well, that’s like I Thessalonians 4, “We’re caught up in the air.” So that would mean we have the rapture mentioned in verse 1 and then the Day of the Lord in verse 2. Well, if that’s your take, then certainly the *apostasia* that follows in verse 3 cannot be the rapture.

Now I mention this because, believe it or not, there are people out there whose names we would know—Bible teachers—who say that this *apostasia* term should be rendered as “falling away,” and then they try to connect that to a rapture. It’s a little silly because your real rapture ammunition would be in verse 1 and the *apostasia* would be something different. So let’s just wipe that one off the table because it’s incoherent in terms of verse 1 and get into our own subject matter here.

So what can we really say about the *apostasia*? There’s no way to be certain about some things, hence the debate among scholars. There are some interpretive hurdles for sure. Let’s just pick it apart. So in the phrase, “unless the *apostasia* comes first” (“unless the rebellion” in the ESV)... I’m just going to use the word *apostasia* because I don’t want to bias anyone with a translation choice here. So in the phrase “unless the *apostasia* comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed,” here’s the question: is the *apostasia* a separate event from the revealing of the man of lawlessness or are they simultaneous things, and therefore basically the same event? Now some of you might not even realize that that’s a question. But if you look this passage up in an academic commentary, you’re going to see that it really is a question. Do we have even in this verse, “unless the *apostasia* comes first and then the man of lawlessness is revealed”... Is that one event or two? We have the same question that you could ask back in verse 1 being asked here in verse 3. Now it might seem obvious if you’re reading English that we have two events here, but the passage wasn’t written in English. It’s also written by Paul, whose Greek has a typical pattern.

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Now I'm using my words carefully here. Paul has a typical pattern when conveying a sequence of events that he doesn't use here. We'll get to why that doesn't nail the door completely. But Paul has a typical way of speaking or writing in Greek when he wants to convey a sequence of events. The separate events idea produces a scenario where the *apostasía* is one thing and then you have the revealing of this one individual. If you combine the two, though, then the statement is to be read as the *apostasía* being the behavior defection of more than one. There are different ways to chop this up and keep it together. Let me just read a little section from Weima's commentary on 2 Thessalonians. It kind of gives you the flavor of how scholars talk about this. He writes:

There is some confusion about the precise relationship of these two events: are they sequential or simultaneous? Placing the adverb "first" after the noun "apostasy" and before the reference to the man of lawlessness, and presenting two parallel clauses with a separate verb for each event—these features have convinced some of the former option: the apostasy comes first, and then after this, the man of lawlessness is revealed. However, Paul does not include the expected "then" (ἐπειτα, *epeita*: so 1 Cor. 15:46...)

We might as well just read that quickly:

⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual.

So his point is that when Paul wants to denote clearly a sequence, he'll use the word *epeita*. That's a typical pattern to say "this, then that." But that isn't present here in 2 Thessalonians 2. Or Paul might use the word "second." In 1 Corinthians 12:28, he does this:

²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third...

He'll number things when he wants to convey a sequence. Weima's point here is that this is how Paul typically gives us a chronology, but he doesn't do that here. Back to his quotation here.

These features have led the vast majority of commentators to adopt the latter option: the coming of the apostasy and the appearance of the man of lawlessness are two simultaneous events that ought not to be distinguished sharply from each other.

That's where the majority of scholars are, because follow the reasoning: if Paul didn't want these two things to be viewed simultaneously, he would have said "this," and then used the word "then," or he would have numbered things. So most scholars think that the *apostasía* and the revealing of the man of lawlessness are simultaneous and they're kind of inseparable in that way.

They're simultaneous events and they ought not to be distinguished really sharply from each other. So you realize where people could go with this. They could define the *apostasía* as the revelation of who the antichrist is—that that's the apostasy. The revelation of the antichrist *is* the apostasy—the *apostasía*. If you view the events simultaneously, that's the direction you go. Now Weima says:

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These grounds for the latter option, though suggestive, are nevertheless not weighty, since it is always dangerous to draw too much from an “argument from silence” (what Paul did not say) as well as the fact that the apostle occasionally begins with a reference to the adverb “first” without continuing the series with a “next” or “second” (see Rom. 1:8; 3:2; 1 Cor. 11:18). The reality that Paul is not clear about the precise relationship of the two events (the grammar is ultimately ambiguous).

Now Weima goes on to cite Lightfoot, who's a very famous New Testament scholar in this regard, and Lightfoot says this:

The apostle [Paul] is less concerned in verses 3–12 with laying out a specific timetable for these eschatological happenings than with correcting the false claim about the day of the Lord and thereby comforting his Thessalonian readers. Whatever the precise relationship between the coming of the apostasy and the manifestation of the man of lawlessness, the church in Thessalonica knows that these two events must clearly occur “first,” that is, before the day of the Lord can come.

So you have two options: either the *apostasía* and the unveiling—the revealing—of the man of lawlessness are simultaneous and essentially the same thing (or two sides of the same coin) or they're two separate events. Now I would agree that Paul really isn't concerned here... I think Lightfoot's point is well taken: Paul is not concerned with giving a specific timeline in verses 3-12 for all of the things that are going to happen in their proper order. He's really only concerned with telling the Thessalonians, “Look, there are some things that are going to happen before the Day of the Lord comes, so when you hear somebody, even if it's some kind of phony letter that people claim is from us that the Day of the Lord has already come, don't believe it.” So all Paul is trying to correct is that the Day of the Lord has *not* come. There are things that need to happen first, and here's a grocery list. But he's not concerned about laying out a specific timetable. I think that's coherent.

Really, the best support for either view—I think we've sort of hit on that. You could look at these two things, the two events are one. I think if you're going to go with two related but distinct events, you have that *apostasía* and the revealing. Well, the revealing is one person (this man of lawlessness) and the former just seems to be corporate. The context seems to suggest that the *apostasía* is more

than the behavior defection of one character because he's talking about things that have to happen before the Day of the Lord that affect masses of people, because the Day of the Lord is going to affect lots of people. So I can't see restricting the *apostasia* to only one person here. There are some who are going to point out, for instance, if you look at the beginning verse 4... Let me read verse 3 and then hit verse 4:

³ 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 destruction, ⁴ 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.

They would say, "Look, look what that guy does! That guy forsakes the faith. That guy is an apostate." So if verse 4 describes the apostate who is the man of lawlessness, then the *apostasia* and the revealing of the man of lawlessness must be the same thing. People are going to argue that. But it just seems to me that while you could go either direction (there's nothing that clearly rules out one or the other), I favor the view that we have two related events here, but they are distinct events. I'll admit there's no way to be 100-percent sure, but I favor the idea of two separate events (not simultaneous events) because I think 2 Thessalonians 2:3, and more in the passage, may reference what Jesus taught in Matthew 24:10-14. Let me just read that, because it'll sound somewhat familiar here.

¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Jesus is clearly referring to the Day of the Lord, with "the end will come," the kingdom reaches its final form, and there's a judgment context, there's a kingdom context here. So he's talking about the same thing Paul is, and you'll notice that in that Matthew passage, there's similar vocabulary. So I'm willing to bet that there's some relationship here between Matthew 24:10-14 and 2 Thessalonians 2, and if there is, then the *apostasia* refers to something that happens with respect to lots of people—it's a mass event, it's a corporate event. It's not just one guy. So that's why I veer away from the notion that the *apostasia* and the unveiling of the man of sin are the same thing. I'm admitting again that we can't be 100-percent sure that they're not the same thing, but I think the weight of what's in the passage, because Paul's trying to correct a problem that applies to

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masses of people (this false teaching about the Day of the Lord)... So I think that favors looking at the *apostasia* as a mass corporate thing, whatever it is, and then I think the relationship to Matthew 24 argues for that, as well.

Again, it's not perfect. Let's just try to be honest here. If you look at Matthew 24, someone could ask whether it takes us in a different direction. On the surface, it kind of seems obvious that Matthew 24:10-14 with its description of people (corporate going astray) precedes the Abomination of Desolation event. That seems kind of obvious because you have verses 10-14, and then in verses 15 and 16, you get the Abomination of Desolation, which is obviously something that's described in 2 Thessalonians 2, when the man of sin exalts himself above every god and goes into the temple and declares himself to be God. We get that. So you've got a chain of events there that would seem to be a template for two separate events (and that's my view—there's two separate events), but there's an ambiguity there, too. Let's read Matthew 24:10-16 with the abomination part included, and you'll see what I mean here, that's it's still kind of ambiguous. So I'm trying to be fair to the other side.

¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

¹⁵ “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

So you could read the “so when you see the abomination...” and say that all this other stuff is the abomination. I'm just trying to argue how the other side would argue to try to make the *apostasia* and the abomination are the same thing. They would take the “so when” terminology (that's a legitimate translation of what's in the Greek) and say, “Look, they're the same thing.” I'm just not buying it because it's very clear, whether we're in Matthew 24 or whether we're in 2 Thessalonians 2, that the *apostasia* stuff is a mass event, and the revealing of the man of sin—the man of lawlessness—and what he does is a singular event. It's not what everybody does, it's what *he* does. So I still think those are two separate things that might be consecutive, but they're not simultaneous. That's just my take on it.

So how do we understand *apostasia* itself? We mentioned earlier that there are a few semantic nuances here. Possibilities: defiance, rebellion, abandonment, a breach of faith, or a betrayal. These options are really only distinguishable by

their object—that is, what is the thing or the entity against which the *apostasia* is being perpetrated? It's either rebellion against normal civil order (everything sort of going to hell in a handbasket, everything's chaos) or it's rebellion more specifically against God and God's truth. Now given any connection with Matthew 24 (and I think there is a connection, however that works out), it would seem obvious that the *apostasia* is a religious theological issue. It's not about rebellion against civil authority. I think 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12 really drives us in this direction. So here we are in the same passage, 2 Thessalonians 2, and listen to what we read:

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¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹² in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

This is the result of the apostasy—God sending them a strong delusion so that they who didn't believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness would be condemned. This points to a defection, an abandonment, a rejection, a resistance (however you want to put that) against God and the truth of God. It's not about civil authority. I realize some commentators go the civil authority direction. I just don't see how you can do that. I think the odds of that are very low.

So I'm trying to be fair to other views here as we go through the passage, which claim there's legitimate ambiguity here. I don't see much ambiguity here because I don't know how much clearer Paul could be. It's really about not believing truth. He says that point-blank in 2 Thessalonians 2:12.

So how do we characterize the *apostasia*? I think it's a rebellion, or an abandonment, betrayal against truth—some item of truth. Defiance... Here's another semantic thing. Is this a defiant rejection of truth? Defiance has a hard-hearted flavor and would no doubt apply to some who actively reject the faith for whatever motive. If we think of it as an abandonment, then it sounds less defiant. It sounds less in-your-face. It sounds like people are losing faith. It sounds less aggressive than rebellion, but the effect is the same. People, maybe under persecution, they just leave the truth behind. They leave. They stop believing. So I think *apostasia* could speak to both (a hard-hearted rebellion, an open defiance), but it could also speak to just losing faith (a less defiant flavor in that option). To me, this question doesn't matter as much because the effect is the same: the truth is left behind. People turn away from the truth for whatever reason or under whatever circumstances.

One final note about the *apostasia* before we get to the second aspect of all this, and that is the talk about Nero. Now Nero gets mentioned often in regard to being the man of sin or the antichrist. I would suggest that in what we've just

talked about to this point, Nero is completely ruled out as the man of lawlessness. Look at the passage, 2 Thessalonians 2:7-8.

⁷ 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.⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

Here's the point: the death of the lawless one (the antichrist) is by the hand of Jesus when Jesus returns. That didn't happen with Nero. It doesn't describe Nero's demise by any stretch. So for the life of me, I don't know why people are still clinging to Nero as the man of lawlessness. It's like verses 7 and 8 in 2 Thessalonians aren't even there. I'll read verse 8 again.

⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

Even if you say the killing there is metaphorical, the two things are connected: the return of Jesus and the demise (the death) of the beast (the antichrist), just like Revelation has. When Nero died, we didn't get the Second Coming. We didn't get the Day of the Lord. Full preterists are going to come up with some spiritual coming, or whatever. Well, that's wonderful. Let's just take nothing about the Day of the Lord at face value then. The Day of the Lord is concerned about more than the Second Coming and the return of the Messiah. It's about the consummation of the kingdom—it's about the judgment of all evil. The Day of the Lord is sweeping and comprehensive in its language in both Testaments. I don't know about you, but I am not living in the consummated kingdom. Bellingham's nice. Lindon is nice. The United States is nice. But those aren't the consummated kingdom. I just don't know why Nero is even a viable candidate in the discussion because of passages like this. It's a very clear association between the death of the lawless one and the return of Christ. So that didn't happen with Nero. I think we can wipe Nero off the table. I would say also that Matthew 24 kind of reinforces this point, as well. Matthew 24:13-14:

¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

I've got news for you: the gospel was not preached to all nations by the time of Nero's death, even if one argues that it only means the nations of Genesis 10. Jesus didn't return and kill Nero. The end didn't come. The Day of the Lord didn't come. So just for coherence's sake, I think we can wipe Nero off the table. We

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don't take any particular eschatological view. If Nero's not in the picture, the only thing that it really harms is something like full preterism, but they're going to come up with something there. But if you're going to take that view, you've basically got to take *nothing* about the Day of the Lord at face value. This isn't news, but it's kind of an extreme position.

But anyway, part two of the passage. We really dealt with the first four verses. Part two is about the restrainer. We talked about the *apostasía*, and I'm landing on it being a corporate event. It has something to do with forsaking of truth, whether that's hardhearted or people just lose faith—a little less defiance. It doesn't matter to me, because the result's the same: the truth is forsaken. So we've got that. That's going to precede Revelation—the unveiling of who the beast is, the man of lawlessness. But now we get to verses 5-8. I'm going to read those, because now we're in related but different subject matter. So verse 5, Paul says:

⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶ And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

It's kind of interesting... Just as a sidebar, the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. That suggestion is also in Matthew 24, so there's definitely a connection here between those two things. Let's stick here with verses 5-8. Who or what is the restrainer? We have to ask the question that way for a specific reason that we'll get to in a moment. Now, what I'm going to do here... I've uploaded both of these articles into the protected folder that you have access to if you subscribe to my newsletter. Go to www.drmsb.com. It's on the righthand side. These are very technical articles. Honestly, you will not be able to get too much out of them unless you know some Greek or you can use some Greek tools. You're going to have to be able to read the Greek characters, as well. These are technical articles, but they're really good. They're both by the same person: Roger D. Aus. One is entitled "God's Plan and God's Power: Isaiah 66 and the Restraining Factors of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7." That's from *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, back in 1977, so it's fairly old, but it's an excellent article. And his other one is "The Relevance of Isaiah 66:7 to Revelation 12 and 2 Thessalonians 1". That's in a highfalutin German academic journal, the *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*. (I love to say German stuff like that—it makes you sound really smart.) That's in 1976. So he wrote these two articles essentially back-to-back. And the reason I think they're important is because they're one of the few attempts... You'll see this in a serious academic commentary, but most people when they do prophecy research, they're not using serious material. I'm just

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going to be blunt. They're not. They're quoting Tim LaHaye or John Hagee, or... It's time to graduate to real material here. His articles are the most detailed attempts to relate the language (in our case, we're going to focus on 2 Thessalonians 2) back to Isaiah 66. This passage has real hooks into Isaiah 66, and if you know that and you check at what Paul is doing (how he's tracking through Isaiah 66), it will help answer the question of who or what is restraining—that whole issue. So that's why I want you to know these articles exist and have access to them.

Now there are a few grammatical observations that we can even see in English. Look at verse 6, "and you know what is restraining him." We've got two issues here. "What" in verse 6 is translated that way in English because we have a neuter article. It's *to katechon*, in verse 6. There's a neuter article here, so we don't want to translate the verse, "and you know *who*," or "that *he* is restraining." You say, "and you know what," because you have to sort of neutralize the word there. It's a "what" instead of a "he." That's one issue—we have a neuter grammatical construction here. ESV says, "you know what is restraining him." The word "him" is interpreted in the ESV translation. There is no pronoun in the Greek text behind the word "him" in English. Literally, the verse says, "you know what restrains." There's no object. "You know what restrains now, so that he may be revealed in those times." So the word "him" there is supplied.

In verse 7 we have some issues, as well. In verse 7 it switches to masculine. Now catch this. Verse 6, "you know what is restraining," and then verse 7, "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." So we have a neuter *to katechon*, and we have a masculine *ho katechōn*. We've got a neuter and a masculine, both described as restraining, which is really weird. Well, is it a *thing* that's restraining all these events, keeping them from happening? Or is it a person? Is it an *it* or is it a *he*? Is it a thing, or is it a person that's doing this restraining? Well, we have to answer those questions. We have to come up with an answer for the restraint that satisfies both the neuter and the masculine—both the impersonal and the personal. Otherwise, we're not interpreting correctly. We have to identify the restraint in some way that it satisfies both of those circumstances.

Now if you've done any reading on this, you may have come across different candidates for the what or the who of the restraint. A lot of commentators will say it's the Roman state, which... If you think the *apostasía* is about a rebellion against civil authority, that makes sense to think that the restraining force is the Roman Empire, because it was big. It was powerful. It would kill dissent. We've already said that the *apostasía* as a rebellion against civil authority doesn't make a whole lot of sense, because Paul seems to be talking about the *apostasía* as a departure from or forsaking of truth. Truth is the issue for Paul, not civil government. So even though that's a popular option for commentators, I don't think it makes much sense.

Second, there will be some who say that it's an angel of God. There's an angel up there somewhere restraining all of this, keeping the End Time timetable in its place, or holding things in check until God says, "Let 'er rip." And usually, this is Michael. You'll find material that talks about Michael being the restrainer.

Third option: some say it's the preaching of the gospel—that the spread of the gospel acts as a restraint against evil. In other words, as the gospel goes out and hearts and minds are changed, then that creates a lesser circumstance for a mass apostasy. As more people come to the Lord, this apostasy is lessened, and that forestalls the End Time events. You'll read that option, as well.

And some, lastly, will say it's God—God's own will and his plan. He's the one restraining things. Now, those are the four options you'll probably run into the most. You might find some outliers somewhere—that's all well and good. What I'm going to try to do is not just play some game and pick the one I like here of the four. We want to go back to Isaiah 66. Now I'm going to be quoting some of the things that Aus says in his articles, specifically the article "God's Plan and God's Power: Isaiah 66 and the Restraining Factors of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7." I'm going to quote a few parts of that. Since this is a dense technical article, it's a little bit of a challenge to communicate what Aus is saying and what he's seeing (the relationship between Isaiah 66 and 2 Thessalonians 2) but I'm going to try. I think we can pull it off, and you'll see why these two passages need to be read in tandem, and that helps us come to some conclusions. So Aus says initially:

40:00

Because of the great number of interpretation possibilities in the text of 2 Thessalonians 2, most commentators simply present the major alternative solutions and let the reader choose between them, presuming that no probable answers can be reached.

In other words, they bail. I agree with him. That's typically what you see in commentaries. But he disagrees, and I think he's on to something. He writes this:

The use of definite passages from the OT in the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians, however, offers the possibility that the author has used one of these same passages for part of the background of his thought on the *katechon* / *katechōn* complex several verses later. First, it is probable that Psalm 88(89) is employed both in 2 Thess 1:10 and in 2:3. Secondly, I have elsewhere proposed that the last chapter of Isaiah (66), describing the final theophany of the Lord, has influenced the presentation of Jesus' final appearance in 2 Thessalonians 1 in a major way. This essay will now point out how other verses in Isaiah 66 help to explain what and who are "holding up" the coming of the Day of the Lord, his return in glory, in 2 Thess 2:6-7.

So that's how he begins his article, and I'm telling you right now, I think he's onto something. I think you'll find it really fascinating. So here are his observations.

What I've tried to do here is number some of his observations. If you want the nuts and bolts data, if you can work in Greek, go get the articles, and I think you'll find it worthwhile.

1. First, Aus says, "Hey, let's go back to the preceding chapter, 2 Thessalonians 1, specifically verses 7-10." I'm going to read it to you. Note its description of Jesus' return. Pay close attention to how Paul describes the return of the Lord in the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians. He writes in verse 7:

⁷ ...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Now that description draws heavily on Isaiah 66:15-16. Listen to those two verses:

**¹⁵ "For behold, the LORD will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,**

Remember how the chariots of God are associated with angels in the Old Testament... remember that? Like Elijah and other places.

**¹⁵ "For behold, the LORD will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,
to render his anger in fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire.
¹⁶ For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment,
and by his sword, with all flesh;
and those slain by the LORD shall be many.**

Now, it's very clear that Paul is drawing on that passage in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10. So the point that Aus is making here is that it's certain that Isaiah 66 is in Paul's head in 2 Thessalonians 1. So why not 2 Thessalonians 2? And that's going to be his argument.

2. So his second point (I'm just grocery listing these)... Aus observes that in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, the man of lawlessness "opposes and exalts himself against

every so-called god or object of worship” on the way to proclaiming himself God. Aus says that the Greek word for “opposes” here is found in the Septuagint of Isaiah 66:6, where it refers to how the enemies of God are opposed to God, drawing on the historical circumstances of the writing of 2 Thessalonians... We didn’t get into the whole context here, but Paul was writing this letter to the Thessalonian church, and he specifically has Judaizers—Jewish enemies—that have been trying to undermine his work in Thessalonica. So Aus says, “If we draw on the historical circumstances of the writing 2 Thessalonians, we can note that just as in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 where we read of him “opposing or exalting himself against every so-called god or object of worship and takes his seat in the temple of God, claiming to be God”... Just like that description, in Isaiah the opponents of God are also associated with the Jerusalem temple in some way.

In other words, Aus is arguing that Paul (catch this!) is painting the Jews who are opposing his ministry to the Gentiles in Thessalonica as the enemies of God from Isaiah 66. Paul is looking at Isaiah 66 and noting a reference to the enemies of God there, and the enemies of God in that passage are specifically denying the glorious future of Zion. (We’ll get to that point in a moment.) And Paul looks at that and thinks, “You know what? These Judaizers are doing the same thing. They are teaching the people that I have won to Jesus that the Day of the Lord has already come. ‘Paul is messed up. His theology is crazy talk.’” They’re trying to undermine Paul’s theology about the return of Jesus, because these Judaizers don’t believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is going to return at all. So they’re messing with the Thessalonians theologically. And so Paul looks at Isaiah 66 and says, just like the Jews back there, there were some Jews who specifically denied that the glory would ever return to Zion—Jerusalem would ever be glorious again—that’s what’s happening here. And so Paul plucks the term out of Isaiah 66 in the Septuagint and uses it to label the people here—uses it as part of his description about not only the apostasy, but really the man of sin. It’s really bad: Paul is using the language to associate the Jews with this antichrist behavior. It’s really inflammatory what he’s trying to do here. So that’s what Aus is saying. He uses this word deliberately. The Jews are opposing the will of God—the will of the God they claim to worship—just like back in Isaiah 66.

3. Aus’ third argument: the word for temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 (*naon*) is very likely drawn from Isaiah 66:6 (*naos*). What’s Isaiah 66:6 about? Let me read it. Let me read verses 5 and 6. Just listen to what Isaiah has here.

**⁵ Hear the word of the LORD,
you who tremble at his word:
“Your brothers who hate you
and cast you out for my name's sake [these are the Jews]
have said, ‘Let the LORD be glorified,**

**that we may see your joy’;
 but it is they who shall be put to shame.
 6 “The sound of an uproar from the city!
 A sound from the temple!
 The sound of the LORD,
 rendering recompense to his enemies!**

So what’s going on here? I’m going to quote from McKenzie’s commentary on Isaiah 66. *Second Isaiah* is the title. He says:

Verses 5–6 are detached from the poem by some commentators. But the “roar” of Yahweh is the apocalyptic sound of judgment. The poem moves through two themes, salvation and judgment in that order. But first the prophet mentions the unfaithful Israelites. “Hate” and “expel” do not refer to any open and permanent division in the Israelite community of which we know. The preceding poem indicates a division between the wealthy, including the priests, and the pious poor. The institutional structure of the community was in the hands of those whom the prophet and the pious poor regarded as apostate Israelites. Verse 5 suggests that these apostates expressed incredulity toward the prophet’s predictions of a glorious future and were contented with a realistic adjustment to life as it could be lived. Judgment begins from the temple, the seat of Yahweh’s presence.

So there were some who were denying that the temple was going to be rebuilt, that Jerusalem was going to have a glorious future. “Oh, we hope that happens, but that’s just crazy talk.” And so in Isaiah 66, God is angry with that. He’s angry with their faithlessness—their unbelief. And then he just starts ranting on them. But for our purposes, the point is that Isaiah 66:5-6 describe apostate Israelites—apostate Jews—who don’t believe the prophet’s prediction of Israel’s glorious future at the Day of the Lord. 2 Thessalonians 2 has the same theme. You have a bunch of Jews rejecting the truth. What’s the truth? You have Jews—the people of Israel, the people of God—rejecting the very Messiah that their own God had sent and rejecting the idea that he will come again because he rose from the dead. Paul is seeing his opponents through the lens of Isaiah 66 and the unbelieving faithless Jews back in that chapter, in Isaiah 66.

4. So we’re three points in now. We’ve got the context of 2 Thessalonians 1, very clearly tracking on Isaiah 66. We’ve got a word associated... We’ve actually got two vocabulary words now from the Septuagint of Isaiah 66 drawn in to 2 Thessalonians 2. Aus continues with a fourth observation. He says that Isaiah 66:7 speaks of a woman in labor (Zion) who delivers a son... Does that sound familiar? Think of Revelation 12. This is Aus’ other article. Zion (the woman) gives birth to the child (the Messiah). Isaiah 66:7 speaks of a woman in labor

(Zion) who delivers a son, the result of which is the rebirth of the people of God, and the kingdom of God. Aus suggests this may be (in his mind it likely is; in my mind it likely is) a reference to the Messiah, in which case Paul's use of Isaiah 66 makes sense again. It is the Messiah, born from Zion, who will come at the Day of the Lord to restore the kingdom of God. McKenzie notes this in his commentary:

The prophet is sure that the saving act will come suddenly; it is like conception and birth in a single day. The saving act means the sudden appearance of a large number of true Israelites... This miracle is possible to Yahweh. The children of the new Jerusalem are compared, somewhat broadly, to infants at the breast.

Now let me just read some of the passages. Isaiah 66:7—think about the imagery here:

⁷ **"Before she was in labor**

she gave birth;

before her pain came upon her

she delivered a son.

⁸ **Who has heard such a thing?**

Who has seen such things?

Shall a land be born in one day?

Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?

For as soon as Zion was in labor

she brought forth her children.

⁹ **Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth?"**

says the LORD;

"shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?"

says your God.

¹⁰ **"Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,**

all you who love her;

rejoice with her in joy,

all you who mourn over her;

¹¹ **that you may nurse and be satisfied**

from her consoling breast;

that you may drink deeply with delight

from her glorious abundance."

If you think of Zion giving birth to a son, the result of which will be the rebirth of the people of God, who are you going to think of? Paul is reading Isaiah 66 and he sees messianic language here. He sees the coming of Jesus. He sees the birth of Jesus. He sees the return of Jesus to revive the people of God—the kingdom of God. And do you know what else he sees? He sees a bunch of Jews opposing it—doubting it—in Isaiah 66. That is precisely the set of circumstances he's in in Thessalonica. It's precisely the same set of circumstances. He has been preaching everywhere he goes... Read his trips in the book of Acts to Thessalonica. Paul does the same thing wherever he goes—he preaches to the Jew first, and then he preaches to the Gentile. They're all one people of God. This is what he's trying to convince people of. This is the mystery of Paul's theology. We know who Paul is—he's the apostle to the nations, reclaiming the nations, all that kind of stuff. But they're included now in this whole messianic picture.

5. And in Isaiah 66, the nations are very specifically included, as well. This is Aus' fifth point. So we've got all this connection to Isaiah 66, and then Aus notes this:

In Isaiah 66:18-21, we see a description of how the Lord will come and reclaim the nations.

Just listen to this:

55:00

¹⁸ “... the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, ¹⁹ and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. ²⁰ And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD.

It's full inclusion of the Gentile. Now I talk a little bit about Isaiah 66 in *The Unseen Realm* and about how this informed Paul's mission—the reference to Tarshish and Spain. There is no doubt... Just to review what Aus is arguing, Isaiah 66 is in Paul's head in 2 Thessalonians 1. Aus is arguing it's in Paul's head in 2 Thessalonians 2, and he's just given four or five reasons why we can tell that it's in his head. Now he writes on this last point, he says:

The LXX reads in Isa 66:19: "From them I will send [those who are] saved to the nations".

Does that sound like Pentecost?

For the Christian reading this Isaiah text, the "saved" would be those who believed in the redemption found in Jesus the Messiah.

They get sent back into the nations.

This is shown, for example, in Paul's use of this same expression in 1 Cor 1:18 and 2 Cor 2:15.

It's also shown, for example, in Paul's use of the same expression in I Corinthians 1:18:

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

2 Corinthians 2:15:

¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing...

The saved there in those two instances are Gentiles, but initially it's like you have people sent out from these communities into these places and then they come back. The saved or redeemed would be people who have accepted the gospel that God is sending out into the nations. As the Gentile survivors—Gentile believers—were to bring the Jews of the Diaspora back to Jerusalem, so it will be with the Christian missionaries sent out to the coastlands, to the islands far off. It's the picture of Paul's ministry. Now, that's a picture not only of Pentecost, but Paul's whole mission. It's his whole ministry. And it's precisely that ministry that his Jewish enemies at Thessalonica are opposing, therefore making themselves enemies of God. And so Paul sees them as the people opposing Isaiah's glorious vision in this chapter (in Isaiah 66).

Now, with all of that, let's go back to 2 Thessalonians 2 and recall what we're dealing with. We had a couple grammatical observations. We have a neuter—an impersonal "what" that restrains, that's keeping the Day of the Lord from happening. And we have a personal "he who restrains" who is keeping the Day of the Lord from happening. The links between Isaiah 66 and 2 Thessalonians 2 that we've noted in Aus' article lead the author to conclude the following about the neuter reference—"what restrains." Listen to what he says:

Isaiah 66, an OT text employed extensively in 2 Thessalonians 1, thus may offer a solution to the meaning of the puzzling phrase *το κατέχον* ("that which is restraining") in 2 Thess 2:6. It is the mission to the Gentiles, to the coastlands and islands afar off, which could be the (neuter) restraining factor of the author of 2 Thessalonians. It is *God's will or plan* that the gospel first be carried to all men before the Day of the Lord arrives.

In other words, the "what restrains" or impedes the Day of the Lord (and its associated events, like the revealing of the lawless one) is Paul's doctrine of the fullness of the Gentiles. God's plan for bringing the Gentiles back into his family is not yet complete. It needs to be complete before the Day of the Lord. Only when it is complete will the Lord return in judgment. And that is consistent with Pauline thinking throughout his letters, when he talks about the fullness of the Gentiles. Aus goes on to link more vocabulary in 2 Thessalonians 2 to other passages about the beast and the antichrist, like Daniel 11. You can get the articles for that. What I want to focus on is that he takes all that and he moves on to the masculine reference: "he who restrains." I think you can guess who the restrainer is. If the neuter restraint is the plan of God for the fullness of the Gentiles, then it's obvious who the masculine restrainer is. I'll cut it short for the sake of time here. This is the way Aus addresses this. He says, paraphrasing, "Hey, remember the image of the woman in Isaiah 66? Zion, Jerusalem, in labor, about to produce a son—the son?" Here's Isaiah 66:9:

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⁹Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth?"

says the LORD;

"shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?"

says your God.

It's really interesting, but the Hebrew verb for "shut" there ("shut the womb") is *'atsar*, which elsewhere very obviously and coherently means "to restrain, to delay, or hinder." So if you look at Isaiah 66:9, Paul's looking at it after the first coming of Jesus, obviously—after the cross, after the resurrection, after the ascension. Paul has a sense of his mission now from Isaiah 66, and just general Old Testament theology about reclaiming the nations. He now reads Isaiah 66 as a reference to the second coming, because we didn't have the Day of the Lord yet. That's his whole point. The Day of the Lord has not come yet. He goes back and he looks at Isaiah 66, and what does he see there? Well, he sees a bunch of Jews doubting it. He sees a reference to Israel delivering a son. In essence, he's reading it past the first coming. He's now looking at how it's the same son—it's the Messiah produced by Israel—who's going to come again. And God's saying, "Hey, am I going to bring this all up to a head and not follow through with it? Am I who caused to bring forth, am I going to shut the womb? Am I going to restrain?" says your God. Well, he is going to restrain, because he has a plan for the

Gentile nations, which follows in Isaiah 66. We have to have the nations brought back into Zion.

So again, do you see the picture? Do you see the point? If the image of the woman—Zion in labor—about to produce the son is messianic language (that's messianic language and it's associated with the Day of the Lord), then God is the agent in Isaiah 66:9 who is restraining the return of the son. He is the one metaphorically keeping the womb shut because he's waiting. He's restraining because his plan for the Gentile is not yet done. So this all makes really perfect sense in my head. The neuter (what restrains), that's God's plan for the fullness of the Gentiles. The masculine (the restrainer himself) is God himself. He is the one waiting until the time that *he* knows is the right time to put the Day of the Lord events into motion.

Now, that's the content of what I have in this episode, but I have to tack on a little bit of a commercial, a little bit of a "Hey, what did we learn here?" Maybe that's the best way to say it. What did we learn today, other than the content? What did we learn besides the *apostasía* (which I view as a corporate turning from the truth) and the restrainer? The restraint, of course, is the fullness of the Gentiles plan and God himself is the one keeping everything from happening. Because it's God's plan. He knows when he's satisfied. God knows when the plan is fulfilled or not.

What did we learn here besides all that stuff? And for some listeners, this might make me as popular as vegan options at a burger place—I get that—but I'm going to say it anyway. We learned two things. We learned that interpreting the New Testament without checking the Old Testament is foolish. Second, we learned that we need resources that alert us to how New Testament writers are using, reading, and interpreting the Old Testament. That's what we learned. So I'm going to say this, and like I said, it might make me as popular as a vegan order at a burger place, but anyone you're reading about End Times theology who isn't doing this, who isn't engaging the whole issue of how does the New Testament use the Old Testament... Anybody you're reading about End Times eschatology who isn't doing that should be listened to with extreme caution, if not outright ignored. They are not doing the kind of exegetical work that needs to be done. For my audience, we need to train ourselves to grasp these obvious points. The New Testament writers interacted deeply with the Old Testament. So when we aren't studying scripture the same way and following the same sort of methods that they used to produce it... When we aren't doing that, we can't possibly follow what they were trying to tell us. We just can't. So it might make me unpopular, but that's what we learned. Yep, we learned about the falling away. Yep, we learned about the restraint and all that stuff. But what we really learned were these two things.

1:05:00

TS: And Mike, you've mentioned in the past, New Testament students in seminary today... What are the requirements, really, to go back and study the Old Testament?

MH: Yeah, what you're going to get at an M.Div. level is you're going to get a hermeneutics class where you're going to have (at least part of that class) this beaten into your head. If you take a book study, you will get this drilled into you because you're going to be forced to read through commentaries and journals, and you will see—and your professor will alert you to the fact—that the New Testament writer's using the Old Testament. He's interacting with the Old Testament. So you can get it at an M.Div. level in a hermeneutics class and in a book study if you go to a decent seminary. You might, as an elective, be able to take a class in how the New Testament uses the Old Testament. A lot of seminaries have specific classes like that. So people can get exposed to the method, to the strategy. But at the very least, in a hermeneutics class, you're going to run into this. You can't avoid it.

TS: So it's not as dire as I thought, because you've mentioned in the past that they just get no exposure to the Old Testament.

MH: Yeah, they get very little, and now, without... It's not that I don't want to mention names, it's just that I can't remember the name. Oh, I just remembered the name: Andy Stanley basically telling hundreds of thousands of Christians that follow him to ignore the Old Testament—we don't need it. That's a crime. That is a hermeneutical crime. He should be ashamed of himself. When you're going around saying things like that, you can't possibly know what's going on in scripture, or dare I say, even care. And you're misleading people—you're telling people to read the Bible in a way that's different from how it was written. It's just absurd. So you can get it... I don't know anything about Andy Stanley, but if you went to seminary, this isn't what he would have seen—at least in a hermeneutics class. But he doesn't care. So for a lot of people who would listen to the podcast (the lay community and even pastors), it still falls in the category of, are you willing to put some work into this? And we've talked before on the podcast about why it's hard for pastors to do that. There are some legitimate obstacles there that our whole church circumstance creates. I'm not saying they're adequate excuses, but the obstacles are real and they need to be dealt with. But if people aren't seeing this modeled for them, they're not going to develop any sensitivity to how important it is.

TS: Next week, Mike, we'll be covering the intro of our new book that won the poll, and with that, I just want to thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.