

2 Thessalonians (4): Correction of Mistaken End-times Expectations (2)

Let us turn in our Bibles once again to 2 Thessalonians 2. Last Lord's Day we began to work through this section of Paul's epistle to this church in which he was correcting the errant beliefs regarding the second coming of Jesus Christ. Their wrong understanding of the second coming may have been due to their failure to understand rightly Paul's first epistle, or perhaps they had been influenced by false teachers to believe their errant teachings. At the heart of their error was the belief that the second coming was imminent, that His return would occur very soon, that there was no intervening event before Christ returned.¹ Paul assured them in verses 1 through 3 that the day of the Lord, when true believers will be gathered unto Him, will not occur until after two events occur. Paul declared that *first, "the rebellion" must take place*, and *second, the man of lawlessness would be revealed*, only afterward will Jesus' second coming to gather His people take place. Let us read again the first three verses:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ²not 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. ³Let 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, 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."

We showed last Lord's Day that this *first event, "the rebellion", should be understood as "the falling away" from the truth of true Christianity*. The falling away, or apostasy [*ἀποστασία* (*apostasia*)], is a departure from the Christian faith into heresy or unbelief. It describes a sinful departure from the truth. It is not speaking of a falling away of the world, but of the departure from the faith within professing Christendom. The Greek word that Paul used describes a sinful departure from the truth. It is not speaking of a falling away of the world, but of the departure from the faith within professing Christendom. This apostasy describes many who formally had the truth but who will have turned away from the truth, presumably due to the influence of false teachers and their false doctrine.

The *second event* that must take place before the second coming of Christ is that **"the man of lawlessness is revealed."** This is commonly (and rightly) understood to be a reference to the antichrist, who/which is mentioned in a number of passages in the Holy Scriptures.

The conclusion that must be drawn is that the Apostle Paul taught that the second coming of Jesus Christ was not an imminent event, but that it would take place in the future sometime after these two events had transpired. And as we pointed out last Lord's Day, these verses, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, totally discredits the common and popular dispensational teaching that the future second coming of Jesus Christ will take place in two stages--the rapture and the revelation--separated by a seven year tribulation period.

Now who is this "man of lawlessness"? There are different interpretations that vary greatly from one another. The majority of evangelicals believe a *futurist* view that the man of sin is that the antichrist is a single individual whom will rise to rule over the world in a future 7-year tribulation period. They claim that he will be primarily a *political leader*, even a world dictator, who will come to power after the rapture of the church. There are others, however, who hold to a futurist view, who also believe that the man of lawlessness is a future end time person, but they view him as being a religious leader within the church. There are many

¹ Or perhaps some had believed that He had returned already but they feared they had missed participating in His return.

reformed scholars who do not believe in a pretribulation rapture, but one second coming at the end of the age, who, nevertheless, believe the antichrist will be an individual who will rise at the end of the age.²

In contrast to this futurist view, Christians have held throughout Christian history (until the end of the 19th century) what may be called the “fulfilled” interpretation of the man of sin. These Christians have believed that the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church, that is, the institution of the popes, is the antichrist. They have affirmed that the pope of Rome is the man of sin, or the man of lawlessness.

The belief that the Roman Catholic papacy is the man of lawlessness, or the antichrist, is set forth in all of the older Protestant confessions of faith. It is stated in the historic **Westminster Confession of Faith** in this way:

There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof; but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalts himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God. (WCF, Ch. 25, Art. 6)

The wording was somewhat modified adopted by the framers of our own **Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689**. This statement regarding the papacy is found in Article 26, paragraph 4. It reads,

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner; neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming. (Col. 1:18; Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 4:11, 12; 2 Thess. 2:1-9)

This is the most debated statement in the confession by reformed Baptists today. There are those, though acknowledging the error of the papacy through history, nevertheless, who believe there will be an end time antichrist who may not be a Roman Catholic pope. **Peter Masters**, the current pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London (the church that Charles Spurgeon pastored in the 19th century) gave this qualification to the article in The Baptist Confession of 1689:

This last paragraph is regarded by many who affirm this Confession, as the only debatable statement. There is no disagreement among them as to the heresy and darkness of the Church of Rome, nor of its instrumentality as a tool of Satan down the ages. The papal system is certainly utterly anti-Christian in spirit, form and effect. The issue is-- will the last pope of time be a servant of the coming antichrist or will he be the antichrist himself? Or, will the Church of Rome prove to be the antichrist? The ‘man of sin’ may turn out to be a person or even an atheistic ideology, but very few teachers today are prepared to make a definite identification. However, at the very least it must be said that the office of the “Pope of Rome” is in the power of antichrist, and any serving pope is a man of sin and a son of perdition who exalts himself against the true Word and the message of grace.³

Masters acknowledged that “many”, who otherwise affirm the teaching of this confession, are not convinced that the papacy should be identified as the foretold antichrist of Scripture. Most of today’s Reformed Christians would acknowledge Roman Catholicism to be a corrupt institution that promotes heretical doctrine; nevertheless, “few teachers today” are prepared to make a direct assertion that “the man of sin”--the antichrist to come, is the pope.

I. Paul’s description of the man of lawlessness (2:3-10)

² This second category of futurists is those in the reformed camp, but who reject the futurist dispensational understanding of the antichrist. They believe that the antichrist will be an end time person, but he will be a religious leader, not a political dictator.

³ Peter Masters, *The London Baptist Confession of 1689* (Wakeman Trust Confessions & Catechisms, 1981), p.

Let us consider the apostle's description of the man of lawlessness. This is set forth in verses 3 through 10:

³Let 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, ⁴who 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. ⁵Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. ⁸And 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. ⁹The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

Aside from his identification as “the man of lawlessness”, Paul describes him in the following ways:

1. The Antichrist is “the son of destruction” (2:3).

The way that one views the noun, “destruction”, will determine his understanding of what the apostle meant by this term.⁴ Some might say that the antichrist as “the son of destruction” means that *he is a destroyer*, one who causes the destruction of others. But probably the idea that Paul intended to convey was that the final destiny of the man of lawlessness was his own “destruction.”

Interestingly, both the King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) translate the phrase as “the son of perdition.” Perdition is another term for hell or damnation. Paul had used the same Greek word in chapter 1 when he described the damnation of the unrighteous. We read in 1 Thessalonians 3:8-10, in which he described the coming of the Lord when He will be

in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹These shall be punished with everlasting *destruction* from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰when He comes, in that Day...

The idea of the man of lawlessness experiencing his own destruction or perdition is most likely when we consider the contexts of other uses of the word. The **Apostle Paul** wrote of the damnation of nominal Christians in his epistle to the church at Philippi.

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹*Their end is destruction*, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. (Phi. 3:18f)

The **Apostle Peter** wrote of some who twist the meaning of Scripture that results in their destruction, or damnation:

¹⁵And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist *to their own destruction*, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Pet. 3:15-16)

⁴ For those “into” grammar, if “of destruction” is a subjective genitive, then the man of lawlessness causes the destruction of others. If “of destruction” is an objective genitive, then the man of lawlessness will himself experience destruction. This latter explanation is best. The end of the man of lawlessness is “destruction” or “perdition”, or “damnation.”

The **Lord Jesus** spoke of the damnation of Judas Iscariot: “While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except *the son of perdition*, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John 17:12). This expression, “the son of perdition”⁵, is the same Greek phrase that the ESV translates in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as “the son of destruction.” We may draw the conclusion that the apostle used this expression to describe the outcome of the man of lawlessness, even his eternal damnation.⁶

2. The Antichrist “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship” (2:4).

This man of lawlessness seeks to exalt himself as against, and we could say, above “every so-called god or object of worship.” He is the antichrist, who is both opposed to Christ and a supplanter of Christ.

Now some in the past have claimed that Paul meant to set forth the emperors of the Roman Empire as the man of lawlessness.⁷ During the end of the first century, living Roman emperors began to claim that they were divine and therefore exalted themselves above every “god” and every other object of worship. This claim and demand of the Roman emperor to be regarded as god became the major cause for the intense persecution of Christianity that continued into the early fourth century. Some have pointed to an early event in the first century that was contemporary with the time of this writing:

Most commentators draw attention to the attempt by Caligula to set up an image of himself in the temple at Jerusalem, an attempt that was frustrated only by his death. This took place in A.D. 40. The attempt raised widespread horror among the Jews. It may well be that Paul has this incident in his mind in writing these words. At the same time, what he says goes beyond anything Caligula attempted. The Man of Lawlessness is not pictured as setting up a statue of himself, but as taking his seat in person (cf. Ezek. 28:2).⁸

The man of lawlessness seeks to supplant all other religious belief and practice, and asserting that loyalty and devotion should only be rendered to him. The next statement confirms this understanding.

3. The Antichrist “takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (2:4).

Those who hold to a *futurist view* of the antichrist, whom they say will not be revealed until after the rapture of the church, assume and assert a great deal from this verse. They say this is a prophecy of the future end time antichrist, the world’s dictator, who, at the halfway point of the 7 year tribulation, will enter the Jewish temple, which will one day be rebuilt in Jerusalem. He will then and there claim to be god and demand that everyone everywhere worship him only. In other words, they take this “temple” to be a future literal, rebuilt, physical, Jewish temple. However, those who hold to the *fulfilled view* of the man of lawlessness assert that Paul’s reference to the “temple” here and elsewhere is a reference to the church of

⁵ “The son of perdition” is the translation of the Greek phrase, ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας (Cf. John 17:12; 2 Thess. 2:3).

⁶ As I stated, the Greek grammar of the phrase, “the son of destruction”, could be translated either as the son who causes destruction or the son who will be destroyed. Interestingly, the NIV translates the phrase, “the son of destruction” in 2 Thess. 2:3, as “the man doomed to destruction.” This is an example of how the NIV is a “dynamic” translation, that which attempts to translate the *thoughts* of the translator, rather than a “literal” translation, which attempts to translate the *words* of the original language into English. I believe the NIV was right in their effort in this instance, but there are other occasions in which, in my opinion, they make wrong assertions of the nuances of verses.

⁷ This was the view of the 19th century Presbyterian, B. B. Warfield, as asserted by William Hendriksen. See William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1955, 4th printing, 2007), p. 173.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (William. B. Eerdmans, 1959), p. 223.

Jesus Christ. They conclude, therefore, that this man of lawlessness is a false Christ, who asserts himself in Christendom as the true god who is to be revered and obeyed as god. **Greg Beale** defends this position⁹:

What, then, does Paul mean when he says that the end-time adversary of God's people will *set himself up in God's temple* to do his deceiving work? Many believe this refers to the rebuilding of a literal, physical temple for Israel in Jerusalem at the end of time and setting up of the antichrist in that temple to deceive and to be an object of worship. The problems with this view are manifold. First, 2:3 does not appear to be talking about an apostasy from the faith in a geographically conceived Israel. The majority of Israel has not and does not believe in Christ and is thus incapable of "falling away." It is also difficult to conceive 2:3 as alluding to an "apostasy" of unbelievers among the nations who are not part of the visible church, since they possess no belief from which to fall away. Rather, 2:3 appears to be alluding to a yet future massive falling away in the community of faith, the church, throughout the world.

Furthermore, that 2:3 is about a massive apostate movement toward the end of history in the church and not in Israel is apparent from the phrase *God's temple* in 2:4. This reference to the *temple* shows that the church community is the place where end-time prophecies about Israel and its temple will take place. The same phrase, *God's temple*, is found nine other times in the New Testament outside of 2 Thessalonians, and it almost always refers either to Christ or the church. Not once in Paul (five other times outside 2 Thessalonians) does it refer to a literal temple in Israel of the past or future. It is true that Matthew 26:61 refers to destroying the physical "temple of God" and rebuilding "it in three days"; that is, rebuilding the spiritual temple. So Matthew represents a transition to a spiritual temple that is the only focus of Paul and, for that matter, the book of Revelation (3:12; 11:1, 19; and other passages where "temple" appears alone). According to John 2:21, when Jesus referred to rebuilding or raising up of the temple of God, he was speaking of his body and of his own resurrection. Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple of God. Israel's former, physical temple was but a physical foreshadowing of Christ and his people as the temple. Because Jesus is the temple, Paul elsewhere refers to believers as the temple of God because they have believed in Jesus and are identified with him as part of his body (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; see also Eph. 2:19-21; 1 Pet. 2:4-7; Rev. 3:12; 21:22).¹⁰

It is my opinion that Paul speaks of the antichrist being a person (or persons) within the professing church. The antichrist is chiefly a religious leader, not a political one.

4. The Antichrist will not be revealed, "until he who now restrains him is out of the way" (2:6-8).

We read of this detail about the revealing of the man of lawlessness:

⁶And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed... (2:6-8)

Dispensationalists assert that "he who now restrains him (the antichrist)" is the Holy Spirit.¹¹ They argue that when the church is raptured at the beginning of the 7-year tribulation, the Holy Spirit who indwells Christians will then be removed from the world. This will then allow the antichrist to immediately arise to power. It should be noted, however, that Paul does not specifically say that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit. He simply refers to the restrainer as "he."

⁹ Although Beale believes the antichrist to be an end time person, he asserts that Paul's use of the word, temple, is a reference to the "church", i.e. Christendom.

¹⁰ Greg K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 207f.

¹¹ It is interesting that the NKJV capitalizes the pronoun, "He", indicating that the translators thought that it was God, or probably more specifically, that the Holy Spirit is the restrainer. But this is an interpretation, for Paul does not identify who the restrainer is; he only stated what he does--"he" restrains the man of sin from being revealed.

There have been other interpretations as to the identity of the restrainer. Those who hold to the fulfilled view of the antichrist, that he has already appeared in history, commonly called the Roman emperor or the Roman Empire itself as “the restrainer” who prevented the rise of the man of lawlessness in the church. The fact is that the identity of one who restrains the appearance of the man of lawlessness is a very difficult matter to determine with certainty. As Hendriksen noted, “Far more difficult to answer is the question, ‘What is meant by *that which* or *he who* is now holding (him) back’ from becoming revealed as “the man of lawlessness?”¹² We will say more about this restrainer when we describe some historical views of the man of sin.

5. The Antichrist will be killed by the Lord Jesus at His second coming (2:8).

We read that the Lord Jesus will kill the man of lawlessness at his second coming. Verse 8 reads, ***“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.”***

The dispensationalists believe that the appearance and influence of this end time antichrist will be 7 years in duration. They say that he will come upon the scene after the rapture of the church at the beginning of the 7 year tribulation, and then he is killed by the Lord Jesus at the end of 7 years at Jesus Christ’s second coming.

There are those others who are reformed who also believe in an end time antichrist. They argue that the Scriptures speaks of a man who will not appear until the end of the age, because it is said that the Lord Jesus will kill him at His second coming.

Those who have held to a historical fulfilment, who have understood the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church as the antichrist, would argue that though the man of lawlessness will be killed by the Lord at His second coming, the text does not say that the man of lawlessness *only* appears right before the second coming. They argue that the antichrist has been afflicting the true church of God throughout many centuries.

The fact is that we do not know who the restrainer is. Paul knew who or what he was, for just before he wrote of the restrainer, he said these words in **verses 5ff**:

⁵Do 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. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed (2 Thess. 2:5-8)

Actually, this is a good argument for the fulfilled position that the restrainer was the Roman emperor and the empire over which he reigned.

Now we can understand why Paul was careful, when writing about it, not to mention the restraint by name. To teach that “eternal Rome” would fall could have brought on unnecessary conflict with the leaders of the Empire within which they lived. Especially when writing to the Christians at Thessalonica would this caution be in order, for it was there they had been accused of doing things “contrary to the decrees of Caesar” and believing in “another king, one Jesus” (Acts 17:7). Wisdom had it that he would simply write, “Remember...when I was yet with you, I told you these things?” (2 Thess. 2:5).¹³

6. The Antichrist will be empowered by the devil to do miraculous wonders (2:9, 10).

We read in **verses 9 and 10**,

¹² Hendriksen, p. 180.

¹³ Ralph Woodrow, *Great Prophecies of the Bible* (Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1971, 1989), pp. 130f.

⁹The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,
¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

The English translations vary slightly in the description of the power that the man of lawlessness possesses.

^{NKJ} **2 Thessalonians 2:9.** “The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, *with all power, signs, and lying wonders*, ¹⁰and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.”

^{ESV} **2 Thessalonians 2:9.** “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan *with all power and false signs and wonders*, ¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”

^{NAS} **2 Thessalonians 2:9.** “...that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, *with all power and signs and false wonders*, ¹⁰ and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.”

^{NIV} **2 Thessalonians 2:9.** “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in *all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders*, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”

^{RSV} **2 Thessalonians 2:9.** “The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be *with all power and with pretended signs and wonders*, ¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”

Some of these translations set forth all of the works of the antichrist as counterfeit, including the miracles, signs and wonders. Another translation labels only the “wonders” as false, in that they are “lying wonders.” Yet another translation identifies the “signs” as “pretended”, but not the “power” or the “wonders.” As I look at the Greek text, it seems that which is false is attributed only to the third in the list, that being “false “ or “lying wonders.” The devil has power to do supernatural things, in order to further his evil purposes in the world.

II. The historic position that has understood the man of lawlessness to be the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church.

Some argue that the view of the pope of Roma to be the antichrist was only the subjective view of the early Protestant Reformers as they opposed and were opposed by Rome. But actually the view of the antichrist becoming the corrupt leader within Christendom has been held and espoused throughout the entire Christian era. I would like us to consider the history of this doctrine by first examining the teaching of the early church Fathers regarding their belief in a future antichrist. Secondly, we will read some comments of leaders within the Roman Catholic Church who believed that the antichrist would be seen in the papacy. (The first notable person to accuse the pope of being the antichrist was himself a pope.) And then third (probably next week) we will consider the testimony of the Protestant Reformers and the Puritans.

A. The understanding of the antichrist before the Protestant Reformation

When the modern evangelical reads in the confessions that the papacy is identified as the antichrist, he is taken back. The present and popular view that the antichrist is an end time political world leader during a future seven year tribulation is so settled in his mind, the claim of the papacy as the antichrist is viewed as

strange and bizarre, even a rather weird anomaly among Bible interpreters of the past. It may be assumed by an unformed evangelical that this view of the papacy as the antichrist was a belief that was unique to the time of the Reformation, given the conflict that Protestants had with Roman Catholicism. But this would be a wrong understanding of history. For although the Reformers and Puritans clearly stated that the papacy was the antichrist, this was not a conclusion subjectively derived solely from their interpretation of Holy Scripture that was born out of their subjective interpretation of Scripture. The Reformed view of the pope as the antichrist was consistent with, and built upon, the united voices of Christendom throughout the Christian era. The view of the pope as the antichrist was not new and novel with the early reformers. This belief in an antichrist rising to power in the professing church was anticipated and declared by many throughout church history prior to the onset of the Reformation.

1. Early witnesses to the coming antichrist

The early church Fathers were in united agreement that the Roman Empire, while governed by the Caesars, was what Paul was referring to in 2 Thessalonians 2. God used the Roman Empire and emperor to restrain “the man of lawlessness” arising to his position of power. This is the same teaching as the Reformers and Puritans with respect to 2 Thessalonians 2:6 which reads, “And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.”

Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-160) advocated that Christians pray for the Roman Empire so that it would continue to restrain the onset of the reign of the antichrist. He believed that if Rome fell, the antichrist would rise.

The preservative power of the Roman Emperor was suggested by **Tertullian** (160-225 AD), in his *Apology*:

There is also another and a greater necessity for our offering prayer in behalf of the emperors, nay, for the complete stability of the empire, and for Roman interests in general. For we know that a mighty shock impending over the whole earth—in fact, the very end of all things threatening dreadful woes—is only retarded by the continued existence of the Roman empire. We have no desire, then, to be overtaken by these dire events; and in praying that their coming may be delayed, we are lending our aid to Rome’s duration.¹⁴

Tertullian spoke more directly of his belief in his comments on 2 Thessalonians 2:7.

Now ye know what detaineth that he might be revealed in his time, for the mystery of iniquity doth already work; only he who now hinders must hinder until he be taken out of the way. What obstacle is there but the Roman state; the falling away of which, by being scattered into ten kingdoms, shall introduce antichrist... that the beast antichrist, with his false prophet, may wage war on the Church of God?¹⁵

Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 313-386) made the same assertion regarding the ability of the Roman Empire to prevent the rise of the antichrist. He wrote:

“This, the predicted Antichrist, will come, when the times of the Roman Empire shall be fulfilled... Ten kings of the Romans shall arise together... among these the eleventh is Antichrist, who, by magical and wicked artifices, shall seize the Roman power.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 32

¹⁵ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, chapters 25, 26.

¹⁶ Woodrow, p. 129.

The same teaching was set forth in the writing of the great preacher of the fourth century, **John Chrysostom** (347-407 AD). These are his comments on 2 Thessalonians 2:7:

One may naturally enquire, what is that which withholdeth, and after that would know, why Paul expresses it so obscurely. What then is it that withholdeth, that is, hindereth him from being revealed? Some indeed say, the grace of the Spirit, but others the Roman Empire, to whom I most of all accede. Wherefore? Because if he meant to say the Spirit, he would not have spoken obscurely, but plainly, that even now the grace of the Spirit, that is the gifts, withhold him... But because he said this of the Roman Empire, he naturally glanced at it, and speaks covertly and darkly. For he did not wish to bring upon himself superfluous enmities, and useless dangers. For if he had said that after a little while the Roman Empire would be dissolved, they would immediately have even overwhelmed him, as a pestilent person, and all the faithful, as living and warring to this end... So indeed he also says here. "Only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way," that is, when the Roman Empire is taken out of the way, then he shall come. And naturally, for as long as the fear of this empire lasts, no one will willingly exalt himself, but when that is dissolved, he will attack the anarchy, and endeavour to seize upon the government both of man and of God. For as the kingdoms before this were destroyed, for example, that of the Medes by the Babylonians, that of the Babylonians by the Persians, that of the Persians by the Macedonians, that of the Macedonians by the Romans: so will this also be by the Antichrist, and he by Christ, and it will no longer withhold. And these things Daniel delivered to us with great clearness.¹⁷

Jerome (A.D. 347-420) lived into the fourth century. He was the translator of the Bible into Latin, which was then the language of the common people. His translation came to be known as the Latin Vulgate. He wrote regarding the antichrist:

"He (Paul) shows that that which restrains is the Roman Empire; for unless it shall have been destroyed, and taken out of the midst, according to the prophet Daniel, Antichrist will not come before that." "Let us therefore say what all ecclesiastical writers have delivered unto us, that when the Roman Empire is destroyed, ten kings will divide the Roman world among themselves, and then will be revealed the man of sin."¹⁸

The major leaders and writers of the early church were united in their assertions that the power of the Roman Empire was preventing the rise of the Antichrist to power. They were fearful of the rise of a pope-like person in the church. The testimonies of these men were all given before the disintegration of the Empire and before the rise of the Roman papacy. These were just a few of many citations that could be set before us to show that the early church fathers saw the Antichrist to rise to control the Church, when the Caesars no longer ruled Rome.

The early Church, through the writings of the Fathers, tells us what it knew upon the subject, and with remarkable unanimity affirms that this "let" or hindrance, was the *Romans empire as governed by the Caesars*; that while the Caesars held imperial power, it was impossible for the predicted antichrist to arise, and that on the fall of the Caesars he *would* arise.¹⁹

2. Witnesses to the antichrist within the Roman Church

Perhaps the greatest witnesses to the papacy to be the antichrist foretold in Scripture are the witness of the words and actions of the popes themselves and of those who highly regarded them. Now there is difference of opinion as to when the papacy became an established institution of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁷ John Chrysostom in his homily on 2 Thessalonians 2:6-9 (see <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf113.iv.vi.iv.html>)

¹⁸ Woodrow, Great Prophecies, pp. 129f.

¹⁹ Guinness, p. 119.

Of course Catholicism claims that the Apostle Peter was the first pope. Rome is the only institution that believes this to be true to history. Non Roman Catholic historians differ in their views. It is a difficult matter to determine with precision for the papacy grew in its extent of power over the course of time. But most scholars would argue that the institution of the papacy emerged over the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries A.D.

The authority of the bishop of Rome increased gradually throughout the centuries until it reached its zenith in pope **Gregory VII** (d. 1085). **Primasius** (died a. 560) wrote a commentary on the Revelation. He declared that the antichrist would substitute himself for Christ in the church, and that he would rule from the seven-hilled city of Rome.²⁰ When **Pope Gregory I** (the Great) (540-604) became the bishop of Rome in the sixth century, he declared that whoever called himself the universal bishop would be a precursor to the antichrist. There were those who desired to call him, “Holy Father”, a title which he refused to assume. Nevertheless, he is commonly regarded as a “reformer” of the church and an effective administrator. Many regard him as the founder of the medieval papacy, which exercised both secular and spiritual power. His successor, **Boniface III**, however, was the first pope to assume this title of “universal bishop.” He claimed to be the primary head of the Christian church. In the eleventh century, **Gherbert of Rheims** declared that the pope sitting on his lofty throne in gold and purple, that if he were destitute of charity, he was “antichrist sitting in the temple of God.”²¹ These were all Roman Catholics who identified the papacy with the coming antichrist.

As time passed, the popes themselves grew increasingly brazen in their claims and in their acceptance of lofty designations and accolades. Paul declared that the man of sin would be one “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 (cf. 2 Thess. 2:6). And although we have been focusing on claims of popes prior to the Reformation, their claims became more absurd and blasphemous as the centuries unfolded. Here is one who recorded what transpired:

Have the popes claimed to be above all *that* is called God, have they claimed to be *as God* in the temple of God, and have they attempted to show that they are *divine*? Yes. They have claimed to be above all kings and emperors. They have claimed not only to rule of earth, but heaven and hell also. They have claimed attributes and titles which can rightly pertain only to God. At the coronation of Pope Innocent X, the following words were addressed to him by a cardinal who knelt before him: “Most holy and blessed father! Head of the Church, ruler of the world, to whom the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, whom the angels in heaven revere, and the gates of hell fear, and all the world adores, we specially venerate, worship, and adore thee.”

Moreri, a noted historian, wrote: “To make war against the Pope is to make war against God, seeing the Pope *is God* and God is the Pope.” Decius said: “The Pope can do all things God can do.” Pope Leo XIII said of himself in 1890: “The supreme teacher in the Church is the Roman Pontiff. Union of minds, therefore, requires, together with a perfect accord in the one faith, complete submission and obedience of will to the Church and to the Roman Pontiff, *as to God Himself*.” In 1894, he said: “We hold the place of Almighty God on earth.”

On April 30, 1922, in the Vatican throne room before a throng of cardinals, bishops, priests, and nuns, who fell on their knees before him, Pope Pius XI in haughty tones said: “You know that I am the Holy Father, the representative of God on the earth, the Vicar of Christ, which means that I *am God* on the earth.”

The pagan Caesar was called “our Lord and God.” For centuries the popes accepted the same title. On the arch raised in honor of Pope Borgia were the words: “Rome was great under Caesar; now she is greater: Alexander I reigns. The former was a man: this is a *god*!” Pope Pius X, when archbishop of Venice, said: “The Pope is not only the representative of Jesus Christ, he *is* Jesus Christ himself, hidden under the veil of flesh. Does the Pope speak? It is Jesus Christ who speaks.

The following is an extract from actual wording that has been used by popes:

²⁰ Ibid, p. 124

²¹ Ibid. p. 126

“The Roman Pontiff judges all men, but is judged by no one....We declare...to be subject to the Roman Pontiff is to every creature altogether *necessary for salvation*....That which was spoken of Christ, ‘Thou has subdued all things under his feet’ may well seem verified in me...I have the authority of the King of kings. I am all in all and *above* all...I am able to do almost all God can do....Wherefore if those things that I do be said not to be done of man but of God: what can you make me but God?...Wherefore no marvel if it be in my power to *change time and times*, to alter and abrogate *laws*, to dispense all things, yea, with the precepts of *Christ*; for where Christ biddeth Peter to put up his sword and admonishes his disciples not to use any outward force in revenging themselves, so do not I, Pope Nicholas, writing to the Bishops of France, exhort them to draw out their material swords?...Wherefore, as I began, so I conclude, commanding, declaring, and pronouncing, to stand upon necessity of salvation, for every creature to be subject to *me*.”²²

Is it any wonder that the Reformers and the Puritans would declare the pope to be the man of sin, the cursed antichrist that would arise in the temple of God, making blasphemous claims, even while he perpetrated upon the professing people of God the sale of indulgences and relics, prayers for the dead in purgatory, worthless pilgrimages, payment for masses, and offerings to idols? And beside promoting unbiblical practice and heretical doctrines, the papacy afflicted and oppressed the people, denied them access to the written Word of God through which they might find truth, hope, and the forgiveness of sins, as they would have been directed to look to Jesus Christ alone as their Lord and Savior.

Next week, Lord willing, we will consider the testimony of the Reformers and the subsequent leaders of the Protestants until the major change in opinion that occurred toward the end of the 19th century.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
And to present you faultless
Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,
To God our Savior, Who alone is wise,
Be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power,
Both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24f)

²² Ralph Woodrow, *Great Prophecies of the Bible* (Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1971, 1989), pp. 144f.