

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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The Man of Sin at Work—and Defeated

Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:5–12, KJV 1900)

I told you these things. Every worthwhile teacher knows the value, indeed the indispensable necessity of repetition. A Bible believer is inundated on every side with constant error. And that error is repeated like a mantra; as the evil one of whom Paul writes in our study passage adroitly uses repetition to mesmerize the unsuspecting and naïve. Sound Biblical teaching should be taught with the freshness of grace, but the message needs constant repetition to help us "...keep in memory" what Scripture teaches us. Paul didn't teach one thing when he was present with the Thessalonians and another thing later when error surfaced. When their error appeared, he gently and clearly reminded them that his present rejection of their error was precisely the same truth that he taught when present with them. The Bible often compares sound gospel preaching to good food. Think about your diet over the last week or so. How many times did you repeat the same or similar food because you liked the taste and because it was healthy and nutritious? The analogy well applies to the gospel. Paul preached sound gospel "Food" to the Thessalonians when present with them, and he reminds them that he is now writing the same truth that he preached to them.

How then did the Thessalonians lose their way? Based on verses two and three, there can be little doubt that other men teaching other ideas "Invaded" the Thessalonian Church and tried to entice them away from Paul's preaching.

1. *Nor by letter as from us.* One could gather from this point that these false teachers actually framed their error in a document and claimed that Paul wrote it, likely suggesting that the Thessalonians may have misunderstood Paul's preaching when he was present with them. The deceiver and people under his influence will use any trick they can imagine to entice faithful believers to leave their faithfulness and follow them.

2. *Let no man deceive you by any means.* Given this sentence, we cannot reasonably doubt that false teachers invaded the Thessalonian Church and blatantly attempted to lead them away from Paul's teaching. The actual error, a false belief that the Second Coming and end of time was imminent was a common Jewish belief of the day. The belief was that the end of time and God's final judgment would shortly follow the coming of Messiah. It was Jewish Christians who created the discord and error in Antioch Church. (Acts 15; notice the letter from Jerusalem Church to Antioch Church specifically states that those who created the discord in Antioch were members of Jerusalem Church, but their beliefs were not what Jerusalem Church believed) They were deluded and sought to gain followers for themselves by their false teaching. *Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment.* (Acts 15:24) The same people may have been the false teachers in Thessalonica.

Whether these people were still members of Jerusalem Church or former members who "...went out from us," they did not convey the truth that Jerusalem Church believed, nor were they rightly representing Jerusalem Church in their sowing confusion and discord in Antioch Church. I am thankful that Acts 15 gives us so much instructive detail regarding how "Sister" churches are to respectfully work together and not seek to rule over each other or ignore each other. Jerusalem Church might have taken the carnal idea, "We are the 'Mother church.' You should do as we direct." Instead, the Jerusalem Church, including the apostles who were present and active in that church, jointly wrote the letter to Antioch Church as equal believers with Antioch.

People who seek to spread error or to gain disciples to themselves often overstate their position, authority, and their knowledge. Those who were involved in the deceit at the Thessalonian Church apparently used a forged document and claimed that Paul wrote it to gain footing in the minds of the Thessalonians. They likely also falsely claimed that they and Paul were far more agreed than they were, more fuel to try to convince the Thessalonians to follow them. If we follow the New Testament's teaching, the one God-appointed teaching authority in any local church is that church's pastor. (Ephesians 4:11 and context) When the people in a church listen and learn from that teaching and encourage each other to abide faithfully in it, the church prospers, and the Lord blesses the church to fulfill Paul's description of a peaceful, healthy, and spiritual body in this context. When others, not unlike the Jerusalem people in Antioch or the false teachers in Thessalonica, work to contradict or diminish this teaching source in the church, confusion and coldness grows. If someone seeks to lead people away from their pastor's teachings, the wise members of the congregation will politely tell the wannabe teacher, "Your ideas don't agree with our pastor. I'm sure you are sincere, but I will abide by his teaching," and politely walk away." No one can teach another if the other person refuses to listen. (Romans 16:17; "...avoid them") The position of pastor/teacher is an overwhelming responsibility, one that Scripture reminds both pastor and church alike, the man shall account to God personally for his teaching. (Hebrews 13:7-17; the person who holds this position is the man who has "...spoken unto you the word of God," the teaching pastor) Peter affirms this same truth. "Feed the flock of God which is among you..." (1 Peter 5:1-3) Peter adds an instructive warning, "Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." The moment a man starts to strong-arm or verbally bully people to agree with him he has violated this passage and should be rejected. I find this passage particularly instructive, especially since Peter wrote it. Obviously, contrary to popular opinion, Peter didn't view himself as the supreme and unquestioned dictator over the Lord's church. The false teachers in Antioch gladly pushed their ideas to the point that Paul and Barnabas "...had no small dissension and disputation with them." (Acts 15:2)

For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. For the present time, the deceiver continues to deceive, but Paul fully assures us that God has not been deceived. In the end, the deceiver shall be "...taken out of the way." Nothing, including Satan and his united hosts can hinder God on His appointed day of judgment and glory. We live in the era of the deceiver's deceit, but never doubt that his days are numbered. I spent my secular career in various areas of the business

world. Both in that setting and on sad occasions in churches where designing men tried to control a church as if it were their personal and privately owned business, I have witnessed the evils of deceit up close and personal. For that reason, I will oppose any appearance of such a spirit in any church. No believer who seeks to follow Jesus has any business imitating the arch-enemy of God.

Many years ago I recall reading an article by a man that he supposedly based on this passage. I was surprised and highly disappointed when the man made the preposterous claim that God is no less the Author and cause of the "mystery of iniquity" as He is the Author and cause of the "mystery of godliness." The idea implies that God is wholly amoral. When confronted with the point, advocates of the idea will twist words and wax eloquent in endless logical fallacies and philosophical reasoning, falsely so called, as Scripture describes such false reasoning in another context, to try to rationalize their idea that God can cause sin and yet not be the cause of sin. Does this sound like double-speak? No surprise; it is! And far worse, it contradicts every principle of God and of His holy and righteous character that Scripture reveals about Him. Jeremiah confronted people in his day whose sin brought Babylonian captivity onto them, but who tried to blame God, "We are delivered to do all these abominations." (Jeremiah 7:10; along with several repetitions throughout Jeremiah's prophecy) It is far easier for the sinful heart and mind to blame God for one's sins than to face the sin and to repent of it. Not long ago a friend and pastor and I were discussing a man we both knew who had embraced this error. We had both tried to reason with the man to abandon this unbiblical belief. My friend made an insightful observation, "He has embraced an idea about God that accommodates his ungodly lifestyle." And my friend, I fear, was right. When people embrace any notion that God causes sin or only "Permits" it when He intends to orchestrate it, beware. It is quite likely that he either has already committed some sin or is considering one and has decided to blame God for it. This is precisely the point that Jeremiah makes in his repeated refuting of this errant idea in his prophecy. Consider a current example. While researching this heretical idea not long ago, I stumbled onto a web site in which a man who believes it wrote his personal belief that God occasionally intervenes and prevents someone from sinning, as when the Lord prevented Abimelech from committing adultery with Sarah. However, the man reasoned, at other times God "...purposes" adultery, presumably in which occasions the sin occurs. Imagine the moral quicksand this idea imposes onto a person who is weak in his moral foundations and is considering this or any other sin for that matter. Why not do your best to go forward with the sin? If God doesn't want you to commit it, He will directly intervene and prevent you from it. But, if you do actually commit

the sin, don't fret or feel convicted. You sinned because God "purposed" (An obvious substitute for "Caused") it. He allegedly intends to use your sin for a noble "purpose." By some form of diabolical reasoning, people who hold to this idea actually think that they may freely break God's moral commandments, comforting themselves in the sin by their false belief that God intends to use their sin for His glory. If he/she didn't so sin, God would be robbed of a grand occasion to show His glory. Paul specifically confronts this twisted thinking in Romans 3:1-8 and refutes it, writing that such a claim represents slander against God and His moral and revealed righteous truth. If we "Take the roof off" this logical fallacy and errant view, we discover the bare depth of its error. If God actually purposes a man's sin and actively orchestrates it, the man's wicked action is an act of obedience that glorifies God. Scripture never hints at such an abomination. *"My brethren, these things ought not so to be."* (James 3:10b) Here James is dealing with sins of the tongue. However, his point challenges this errant fatalistic and pagan idea. If God "Purposes" every sin that occurs, supposedly He also purposed your sin of speech. Do you see the puzzle? Why would God purpose something that God Himself reveals in Scripture that "...ought not so to be"? If it ought not to be, why didn't God simply not "Purpose" it? Biblical truth declares that God is always and only holy and righteous. Sins of all stripe occur in the sinful heart of man, not in the secret will or purposes of God. The mystery of iniquity is Satan's master plan that opposes God; it is not God's secret purpose or will.

The mystery of iniquity is alive and at work today, but rest fully assured; God is not its cause or author. Paul warns us in this context that this intimate servant of Satan will sit in the temple of God and claim to be God, but his message will never agree with God's message. This mystery is part of the deceiver's strategy that God shall reveal and crush in His day. God shall reveal this diabolical adversary in His time, take him out of the way, *"...consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming."* All of this shall occur at the time of His glorious **"...coming."** And that, my friends, is the comforting lesson of 2 Thessalonians 2.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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