

THIRD BEFORE ADVENT C – ST HELEN’S, ABINGDON

9 November 2025



Job 19.23–27a / 2 Thessalonians 2.1–5, 13–17 / Luke 20.27–38

‘We beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind, or alarmed’

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

THE EPISTLE READING has a lot of nerve, first telling us about a mysterious *lawless one* who ‘opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God’ *already at work among us*, but who is being resisted by ‘The *Κατέχων*’, the Restrainer (now there’s a superhero name for you!) — and then the letter casually adds that we shouldn’t be shaken in mind or alarmed by it! Our anxiety will only be heightened when we read the verses that the lectionary squeamishly conceals from us: ‘And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is *false*, so that all who have *not* believed the truth but took *pleasure* in unrighteousness will be *condemned*.’

Under *what* circumstances, I ask you, might the Bible tell us about a shadowy Lawless One — from now on, we may as well call them ‘The Outlaw,’ a more familiar English-language way of characterising someone who flouts our courts and our conventions — under what circumstances might the Bible foretell to us a struggle between the end-times Outlaw (who claims to be God) and *the Restrainer*, someone who battles the Outlaw to a draw, keeps them at bay for the time being... and then the epistle expects us *not* to be shaken in mind, or alarmed? The entire scenario warrants *ample* mind-shaking and alarm as far as I’m concerned; I have children and *grandchildren* who might be subjected to the Outlaw’s deceptive wickedness. The Κατέχων might not be restraining the Outlaw *enough*; around the world, we see atrocities and catastrophes, climate change and genocide. If *you’re* shaken in mind and alarmed, believe me *I* understand.

St Paul (or whomever it is), though, wants us to keep calm and carry on, to love the truth and take no pleasure in unrighteousness. Fair enough. And I have no doubt that in the end, Jesus will recognise what’s going on, will destroy the Outlaw with the breath of his mouth, and bring us peace at last. He will (in the words of our Transport Police) see it, say it, and sort it. In the meantime, though, we *ought* to feel concern for those who have *fallen* for the Outlaw’s power, signs, and lying wonders, those who *believe* the Outlaw’s lies, who stand at risk of being condemned for their misplaced trust. God has allowed a powerful delusion to come over some of our neighbours, perhaps our friends or family, perhaps even some of us here; surely we should care that *they*, that *we*, hear again the truthful word of Christ’s saving grace, to free us from the power of the Outlaw and to turn again to our Saviour.

And *that*, I think, should guide our understanding tonight’s mysterious Outlaw, the elusive Κατέχων-‘Restrainer’, the peculiar letter ‘*as if* from us’ — all the vague, indirect language that suffuses the apocalyptic

atmosphere. These obscure terms aren't *placeholders* for certain single, specific individuals whose names we could fill in; rather, we will *always* be able to find Outlaws working lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception; and we will *always* find people, people like us, trying to *restrain* them, holding back lawlessness as best they can. These figures don't belong *only* to the past time of II Thessalonians, nor to a distant future that we perceive as if in a glass darkly. The obscurity is the point; we don't *name* them and spell them out, because that risks generating the illusion of a single Final Boss whom we can maybe stamp out once and for all. But we, you and I, can only just *restrain*. We aren't tough enough, not pure enough, not true or wise enough to *defeat* the Outlaw, *all* those Outlaws, out of our own strength. In the worlds-long cosmic drama of lies against truth, of corruption against integrity, of *death against life*, we can only just *restrain* the Outlaw. And although that may seem like weak tea, remember that the clue to the Restrainers' job is in the name. God calls us to *resist* evil, to *restrain* the Outlaws who exalt themselves above every god or ideal, and that's *plenty*. So stand firm and hold fast to the gospel — Κατέχοντες, στήκετε! Restrainers, *stand fast!*

Our job is to stand fast, to hold on and to *restrain* the Outlaws in all the ways we can, however small they may seem, precisely because we have faith, we *trust* that the *Lord Jesus* will take on the great work of defeating Lawlessness once for all. We don't have to solve all the world's problems, but we do have to make wickedness more difficult — we have to *restrain* evil by our refusal to play the lawless game. Stand fast in patient integrity, peaceableness, honesty; show our neighbours by our *joy* that, in a world where the Outlaws sometimes thrive, that sometimes they're stymied; where sometimes the Outlaws ascend, at other times they're wrongfooted and cast down; and do not be quickly shaken in mind, or alarmed even when it looks like the Outlaws are on top, for we know that they *cannot* stand firm, they *cannot* prevail, because *Jesus Christ* is Lord; and may our

Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort our hearts and strengthen us in every good work and word.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen