

Lesson #9

The Mystery of Iniquity

Most Christians understand that Christianity started out in great power and know that something happened which seemed to neutralize that power. The purpose of this historical overview is to show the historical decline of the church into the Dark ages, explain why it happened, and set the stage for our study of kingdom preparation. The verse below speaks to this evil, called the mystery of iniquity, that immediately began to work against the empowered people of God.

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains *will do so* until He is taken out of the way.
And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.

— 2 Thessalonians 2:7-8 (NKJV)

We will seek to define the mystery of lawlessness (iniquity), identify who was restraining the revealing of the “lawless one” from being revealed, and see whether this is a historical or future event from our perspective. Having this historical perspective helps us see the strategy of Jesus Christ and understand where we are now in His plan and purpose.

Satan’s Worst Nightmare

Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Satan was completely out smarted and defeated. By killing Jesus, Satan lost whatever authority he had. To make matters even worse for Satan, Jesus not only rose from the dead with all authority in heaven and earth, but He also delegated that authority and power to group of believers when sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. To make matters worse for Satan, these anointed “clones” of Jesus were multiplying! Satan’s worse nightmare was upon Him.

Since it was his nature to do so, Satan continued to steal, kill, and destroy. He used his influence in established religion and in the government of Rome to persecute and murder Christians, just as he had done to Jesus. But intimidation through violence and murder was not enough because this anointed army of Christians did not fear death. The more Christians he killed, the more they multiplied. This army proved to be too powerful to simply attack head on, so Satan needed an additional strategy that would attack from a different angle as well.

Mystery Revealed: Satan’s Anti-Anointing Plan

The power of the Christian is directly connected to the active indwelling Holy Spirit which provides

every true believer with a personal relationship with God. It was the anointing of the Holy Spirit that empowered Jesus and the same is true for those who believe in Him.

Every believer has direct access to God through Jesus Christ, and has access to the same anointing that Jesus had as a man on earth. No earthly priest or mediator is needed. Jesus has become our High Priest forever; He is the only Mediator between God and man. This concept has been referred to as the priesthood of the believer. So while Satan kept on killing and destroying, he also set a diabolical plan into motion. It was a plan to infiltrate the ranks of God's people and sabotage the source of their power from within. It was an anti-anointing or anti-Christ plan.

The word antichrist comes from two Greek words *anti* ("opposite" or "instead") and *christos* ("anointed" or "the Anointed One, Christ"). Therefore, antichrist could be defined as: "*instead of or against Christ*" -or- "*instead of or against the anointing.*"

The mystery of iniquity is a plan to separate God's people from the anointing and the power of God. It was this anti-anointing or antichrist plan that Paul was referring to when he wrote to the Thessalonians saying, "... the mystery of iniquity is already at work." (2 Thess. 2:7). The Apostle John addressed this anti-anointing plan when he said:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth.

— 1 John 2:18-21 (NKJV)

Notice in the passage above how John states that there are many antichrists, but the text also refers to "the AntiChrist" as a singular person. Yet in the NASB and the KJV bibles, the article "the" is left out and the foot note in the NKJV even indicates that "the" is not in the original text. This is an example of man-made interpretation based on a particular view of the future. Therefore, John may not have been referring to a specific person who is to come. To put it in other words, maybe John was simply saying that an antichrist movement is upon us that will seek to replace the anointing that is within us and there are many who are caught up in it.

Also notice how John describes these antichrists as people who "...went out from us, but they were not of us..." This leads us to believe that these antichrists were people who had at some point professed to be Christians and had enjoyed fellowship with the true believers, but were not genuine. As we continue to read John's warnings, we can conclude that these antichrists continue to appear as Christians on the surface. Paul warned Timothy describing them as "...having a form of godliness, but denying the power there of." (2 Tim. 3:5). Satan's plan is all about infiltrating the ranks of Christianity and nullifying the anointing. How? By replacing our relationship with Christ and our individual priesthood with earthly religion, relationships and priests.

Hierarchy Begins

In John's third epistle, John writes to Gaius, who was a member of a Christian congregation, but not the primary leader. The leader of this congregation was a man named Diotrophes, who had been exercising control in this local group. He was malicious toward John and threw anyone who received him out of the church. The root of Diotrophes' error is found in the fact that he loved preeminence.

I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.

— 3 John 1:9-10 (NKJV)

In Diotrophes, we see an early example of the church moving toward centralized hierarchy and away from servant leadership and the encouragement for all believers to walk in the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Such self-elevated leaders resist the priesthood of the believer, make themselves priests over others, and seek to make the people of God dependent upon their leadership instead of the Holy Spirit. **When we see hierarchy that exercises a kind of priesthood over others that teaches people to rely on and look to leadership instead of the anointing — we are seeing the spirit of antichrist and the mystery of iniquity.**

The Merging of Church and State

By the 4th century, the mystery of iniquity with its hierarchy had developed to the point that Satan apparently felt he could stop the Roman persecution of the church and establish an internal control. Rome had been hostile to the Christian faith and persecution persisted until edicts of toleration were signed by the Emperors Galerius, Licinius, and Constantine.

But it was Constantine who, after supposedly being converted to Christianity in 312 AD, declared Christianity to be the official state religion of Rome. He granted extraordinary public favor to Christians, built basilicas, granted privileges to clergy and appointed bishops to high ranking offices. This union was essentially a "marriage" of the church to the Roman Empire. This union reinforced the idea of hierarchy in the church and consolidated authority in a few.

Constantine also removed pretty much all that remained of the Jewish patterns in the church and moved it from the Hebrew calendar to a calendar more like the one we use today. He did not see Christianity as an extension of God's linear plan through the ages, but as a new religion that he was in charge of.

With the marriage of the church to Rome, the church took on Rome's name and became the Roman Church with hierarchy as the norm. The bishops of the regions, particularly the Bishop of Rome, were gradually given more and more power, and they obviously, like Diotrophes, grew to love the preeminence among men. The rise of the Bishop of Rome became apparent in 445 A.D. when Valentinian III, Emperor of the Western Empire, acknowledged him as the last tribunal of appeal over the other bishops. The Bishop of Rome (or at least that office) would eventually gain power until it exercised power over, not just other churches, but over nations and kings!

At what point the real power shifted from the state to the church is unclear, as it was gradual and oscillating. But somewhere around 800 AD, the popes began to appoint heads of state, and eventually embraced the doctrine of papal supremacy, the doctrine that the pope is the infallible leader of the worldwide church and pastor of all Christians. Satan's anti-anointing plan of religious deception designed to centralize authority, undermine relationship with God and disconnect people from the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit was virtually complete, at least in the institutional church.

A story is told of Thomas Aquinas with Pope Innocent II. A large sum of money was spread out before Pope Innocent II when he said, "You see, the Church is no longer in that age in which she said, 'Silver and gold have I none.'"—"True, holy father," replied Aquinas; "neither can she any longer say to the lame, 'Rise up and walk.'"

A Historical War Against Understanding the Future

The term "Mystery of Iniquity" for which this lesson is named, is not only a satanic plan attempting to make believers powerless, but it also seeks to distort our vision of the future and prevent the people of God from preparing the way for Christ's return and the Day of the Lord. This manifested early on as teachings designed to confuse people regarding God's linear plan by teaching that the resurrection had already taken place. Among these were Hymenaeus and Philetus (see 2 Tim 2:16-18).

¹⁶ But shun profane *and* idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.

¹⁷ And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort,

¹⁸ who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.

— 2 Timothy 2:16-18

This teaching was a deception that certainly would have upset the faith of many, causing them to believe they had been disqualified or abandoned by Jesus. Such a view certainly would have fallen right into Satan's plan by causing our preparation plans to be misguided. We have similar teachings today in which some teach that the first resurrection is a mystical or "spiritualized" resurrection that happened when we were saved. But if the first resurrection is a past event, that means we would be in the Day of the Lord right now, a view that in my opinion has far too many holes in it to be credible. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (see 2 Thess 2:1-4) to assure them that the Lord's coming had not happened and that He would not appear until at least two things happened: 1) a great falling away, and 2) the man of sin is revealed.

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

— 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 (NKJV)

1) *The Great Falling Away*

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written about 50 AD. So, for them, the falling away of which he spoke was a future event. But that is not the case for us. When we look at the last 2000 years of history, the gradual embracing of centralized hierarchy and the decline of the church into the Dark Ages, we can clearly see a "great falling away." The "great falling away" is almost certainly a fulfilled event from our perspective today. As we continue our study, we will see that this falling away has been halted and there has been a steady increase and process of restoration taking place since the end of the Dark Ages.

2) *The Revealing of the Man of Sin*

Most people consider *The Man of Sin* and *The Antichrist* to be the same person. Though they are undoubtedly of the same evil spirit, there are several different interpretations regarding this issue. Some have claimed the man of sin to be a secular/political leader. Speculations have included Roman Emperors like Nero (54-68 AD) and dictators like Mussolini and Hitler.

Others, most of the reformers of the 1500's, claim that the appearance of the man of sin is fulfilled in the *office* of the Roman Pope (not just one individual) which came about through the union of the Church with Rome consolidating all authority in one man at the top of the hierarchy. Based on John's description of antichrists being religious, the historic office of the Roman Pope during the Dark Ages seems to be a better fit. The book of 2 Thessalonians, Chapter 2:6-8 also provides insight. It reveals that this man of sin, who exalts himself and puts himself in the place of God, will be revealed when he that is restraining his appearing is taken out of the way.

And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

— 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8 (NASB)

Notice that this restraining person "he." Again, like we saw in 1 John 2:18 above, the NKJV version capitalizes this word, inferring that this "He" is the Holy Spirit. This is purely a human interpretation which other versions do not use. There is again a foot note in the NKJV which says "or he" (not capitalized).

The idea that the Holy Spirit will be taken out of the way is a view based on the idea that the church will be removed from the earth along with the Holy Spirit during a great tribulation period, during which "the" Antichrist will supposedly rule the world. This futurist view was originated by a Catholic Jesuit by the name of Francisco Ribera (1537-1591) who, in an effort to deflect the commonly held belief that the Pope was the antichrist, wrote a 500 page commentary on the book of Revelation that interpreted most of its contents as future events that would occur just before the return of Christ. Much of the futurism we have today is rooted in Ribera's views which I believe it be a distortion of the future. However, this is not to say that no antichrist leaders will arise in our day or at the end of this age - there are many antichrists.

The historical interpretation is that the restraining person referred to as "he" in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8 is referring to the Roman Emperor (which is "he" who represents Rome). Using "he" is simply another way of saying "when Rome is taken out of the way," and does not necessarily refer to a specific or particular ruler.

The actual date of the fall of the Roman Empire is debated because, after it divided and had lost all real power, it continued to exist in name for some time. Many historians mark the fall of Rome to be 410 AD, after Rome was defeated and sacked by the Visigoths. Regardless of the exact date which marks the fall of Rome, we can see that Rome (the Roman Emperor) was effectively taken out of the way which made way for the revealing of a new power that was not defined as a nation or limited by national boundaries.

As we have seen, Rome exercised control over the Church, but after Christianity was officially accepted by Rome, the Bishops gained more and more power and became more and more centralized. Then, when the Roman Empire had been taken out of the way, the Pope rose in power and in many cases became more powerful than the heads of nations.

Historically, with the Pope claiming infallibility and exalting himself as the head of every Christian on earth, the papal office of the Roman Church fits the description of the man of sin who was revealed when Rome/the Roman Emperor was taken out of the way. This would make the revealing of the man of sin a future event for Paul writing to the Thessalonians, but a past event for us.

The Dark Ages

After Rome was taken out of the way, the *overgrown system of human mediation*¹ in the Roman Church gained power until it dominated all of Christendom. It grew to the point that the Holy Spirit was completely ignored and the idea of grace and salvation was all but lost. The corrupt church taught people that forgiveness for sins was based on good works and could be purchased by money. Skilled salesmen went about selling indulgences to raise money for the church.

The Dark Ages was a time when the light of God's word was withheld from the people on a broad scale. In general, they were excluded from the light and life of God through *imposed* ignorance (see Eph. 4:18). This period of history known as the Dark Ages would last approximately 1000 years. The Dark Ages is generally considered to be from about 500 - 1500 AD.

Though the institutional church was corrupt, this fact must be qualified by the fact that God always has his faithful ones. There have always been those who, though they may have existed within the structure of the institutional Church and who may not be recorded in the pages of history books, will nevertheless have great places of honor in the Kingdom of God when it appears.

Consumed by the Breath of His Mouth

As has been alluded to, some believe that the revealing of "*the man of sin*" is a future event because of the letter to the Thessalonians which seems to indicate that this man is revealed just before the coming of the Lord.

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

— 2 Thess 2:8 (KJV)

¹ a phrase borrowed from Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol 3, p 4

But remember that we are dealing with time stretched out over multiple centuries here. Just as we learned that the Day of the Lord is not an instantaneous event but is actually a 1000-year period, we should also consider the possibility that the “consuming of the man of sin” is also not an instantaneous event, but may be drawn out over a long period of time. With that in mind, another look at 2 Thessalonians 2:8 actually supports this.

As one would expect, the words *consume* and *destroy* have different meanings. The Greek word consume in verse 8 is *analisko*, which might imply destruction but really means *to use up*. This would imply a gradual demise. The word for *destroy* is the Greek word for *katargeo*, which means *to render entirely idle or useless*, as in to destroy or abolish, and therefore implies a final event.

Therefore, the idea of a gradual consumption of the man of sin with the breath of God’s mouth and his final destruction at the Lord’s return is credible. This would fit with the belief held by many of the reformers, that the Word of God unleashed in the Reformation is the “breath of His mouth.” The unleashed Word was a force that began to consume, and continues to consume, any expression of “the man of sin” by bringing light where there is darkness. The end of the Dark Ages is marked by the Reformation, which was fueled by the mass production of the printed word. Since that time, antichrist systems of hierarchy and control over the people has been exposed and have been losing influence.

Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.
By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed.

-Job 4:8-9 KJV)

It should be noted that we are dealing with an evil *spiritual* power here, not any one institution. We are not *only* talking about the Roman Catholic Church and its Pope. This anti-anointing plan, which was designed to undermine the priesthood of the believer and centralize authority, is not unique to the Roman Catholic religion. This concept of centralized power was first seen (and disapproved of by God) at the Tower of Babel and it was spreading in the early Church before it found expression through the Roman Catholic Church. It has continued to spread wherever it can. We still see these antichrist systems rear their heads and attempt to establish control, but they are always consumed when the Word of God is brought to bear. They will be utterly destroyed at His coming when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (see Rev 11:15).

The antichrist spirit has manifested itself to some degree in virtually every branch of the Christian Church, both Catholic and Protestant. On the other hand, we see people, both Catholic and Protestant, who continue to seek a genuine relationship with God in spite of the anti-anointing plans and structures they may find themselves in. But wherever there are leaders who have selfish ambition and wherever there are people who refuse to put their relationship with God ahead of their religion, the anti-anointing spirit finds fertile soil. It is the truth of the Word of God that will consume it.

Some students of history see the rise of the Islamic caliphate, with its chief civil and religious leader called a Caliph, as the fulfilment of the antichrist system. However, Paul said the mystery of iniquity was already at work, and since Islam did not appear until the 7th century, we must conclude that, if it is a fulfillment, it is only one of many antichrist manifestations. As John wrote, there are many antichrists (1 John 2:18).

There is a lot of information to process in such studies as this and it is easy to see why this is called the “*mystery of iniquity.*” However, Jesus said it has been given to us to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God (Luke 8:10), and Proverbs 25:2 says, it is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter. This much is clear: The antichrist plan is a plan to replace our relational connection with God with human elements, and to replace true godliness and the Holy Spirit with a religious form void of power and anointing.

Balancing Concepts and Closing Thoughts

This lesson has pointed out that the antichrist concept of centralized power/leadership is a satanic plan designed to undermine the priesthood of the believer and the anointing within us. But we must not discount leadership in general. God is orderly and organizational. Leadership, even a hierarchy of sorts, is absolutely essential in the church. We all need the benefit of human leaders in our lives. One of the goals of this lesson is to help us discern the difference between leaders who draw people after themselves and leaders who point people to Christ.

An antichrist is a person who places himself in the position of leadership in another's life which rightly belongs to Christ, replacing the New Covenant Spirit-led life with legalistic systems of human mediation. The spirit of Antichrist may manifest itself through an individual, a group, a committee, but the result is still an overgrown system of human mediation. *When we see the priesthood of the believer trampled by overgrown human mediation, you have found the footprint of the antichrist spirit.*

The antichrist spirit is a religious spirit that finds its fullest expression when it merges with civil government because that is where it can exercise the greatest power and control. This was what happened during the dark ages, when corrupted religion merged with the civil government creating a state church. When this is the case, the correction is not for the church to disengage from civil government. Instead, it is a call for true Christians to rise up and lead in civil government. Both church and state, as separate institutions, should be partners working together to accomplish the same goals.

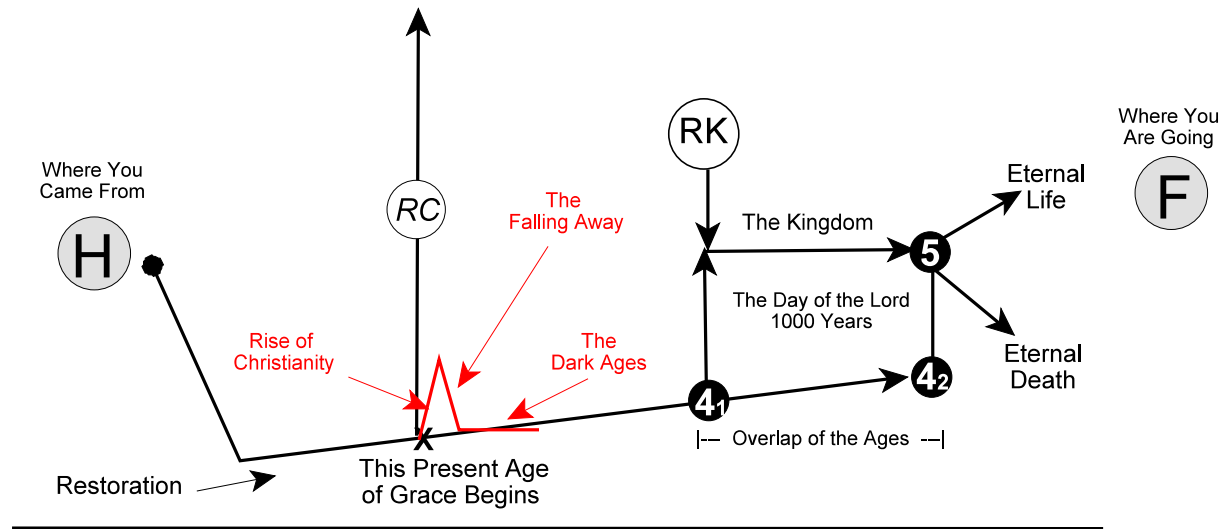
As Christians, we must see our influence upon government as an essential part of our ministry. If we do not influence civil government, someone else will. Separation of church and state, when seen as a disengagement from civil government, pretends to make government neutral, but that is a myth. Someone's views *will* dictate policy. There is no such thing as a philosophical vacuum. Everyone has a religion, even if they call it atheism. Separation (disengagement) is simply a ploy designed to disconnect Christians from civil government so other forces can take control.

The influence of true Christianity creates the freest climate for civil government because it is, by nature, decentralized—each Christian is a priest unto God and has direct access to God by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Extensive centralized external government is not needed for true Christians because they are each individually governed by God internally.

Satan always seeks to corrupt that which is God's and co-opt it for his own use. Therefore, one of his highest goals is to infiltrate and corrupt the body of Christ leaving its name and appearance intact while using it for his purposes. When he is able to do so, he not only recruits people to his purposes, but he sullies the name of Christ and discredits His body.

In Destiny Diagram 9 below, The rise and fall of the early church is superimposed on the ascending line of restoration. The steeply ascending line, starting at the “X” represents three things. 1) The ascending portion is the rise of the Church with foundational truth and Kingdom power in the early church brought about by the teachings of Christ and His resurrection. 2) The descending portion represents the falling away as a result of the mystery of iniquity. 3) The flat portion represents the dark ages, when the church existed largely without the light of truth.

Destiny Diagram 9



- RC** Resurrection of Christ
- 4₁** The First Resurrection & RK- The Return of the King
- 4₂** The Second Resurrection
- 5** Eternal Judgment

In the next lesson, we will look at the reformation and the advancement of the church since the end of the Dark Ages, and continue to develop this diagram illustrating the continuing restoration of truth to the people of God.