

## The Meaning of Departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3

Religious Apostasy, Revelation of Antichrist,  
and Removal of the Restrainer

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Throughout the passing years there has been an ongoing debate among dispensational and pretribulation teachers concerning the meaning of the expression "falling away" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. The KJV English phrase "falling away" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is the one Greek word "apostasia." Its basic meaning is to "depart from" or "go away." It is a compound word that is derived from two Greek words: "Apo" = "to move away" and "stasis" = "to stand." Literally, from its basic definition, "apostasia" means "to go away from, depart, or to stand away from." It literally means "a leaving, from a previous standing." (to change one's position from one state to another).

But we must ask the million-dollar question: "To move away, go away, leave, or depart from what?" Does it mean a departure from the faith or a departure from the earth as in the Rapture of the Church? Does it mean a spiritual change of position or a physical change of position? I think this can be easily determined by the normal meaning of the word and the context. My conclusion is that "the falling away" or "the apostasy" is referring to a departure from doctrinal truth that occurs at a specific time in the future Tribulation Period when Antichrist ("the man of sin" - lawlessness) reveals Himself to be God and the greater part of mankind begins to worship him throughout the earth. In this case, the apostasy that occurs during Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week will be a generalized and universal rebellion against God and His truth.

This apostasy will not consist of a small number of apostates who are somehow related to the Church today but a worldwide apostasy or departure that breaks out within the ranks of unredeemed and fallen

humanity living within the Day of the Lord. The usual understanding of the word refers to a departure and change from religious norms, standing against, positioning oneself against God and His truth.

I want to humbly enter this debate realizing that good pretribulation men differ on the meaning of this word and what Paul is conveying in this text of Scripture. I will interact with some of the authors who present the Rapture view of the word departure, authors and teachers that I respect and still learn from in my own personal studies. I will do it with a spirit of comradery regarding a pretribulation Rapture position and with the understanding that there has been equal disagreement about this text among many able expositors.

When I was first introduced to the Rapture understanding of “apostasia” it did not “ring right” in my ears. My gut instinct told me that something was not correct with this specific understanding of the word in the context it was given. I wanted to believe the Rapture view for it would be another arrow in the quiver for a pretribulation Rapture (the blessed hope) which I wholeheartedly embrace. Of course, truth is not based on feelings or instincts. It is founded upon objective facts. Therefore, my personal studies have led me to take the normal understanding and position of this word.

Apostasia refers to a religious departure, but it’s a specific departure that occurs during the Tribulation Period. It will be revealed during the Day of the Lord with Antichrist deification and worldwide worship of the man of sin who commits this spiritual lawlessness. This will not be an apostasy among those who once followed God but a general, non-Christian, worldwide rebellion against God during the End Times that consists of “them that dwell upon the earth” (Rev. 3:10; 6:10) and the “children of disobedience” in whom the Devil is energizing (Eph. 2:2). In other words, this is an all-out revolt by man against God.

Of course, the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things. We cannot miss the main point of Paul’s teaching in these verses. The Church will not be present on earth during the Tribulation Period, as some were suggesting, because it will be raptured prior to this period of judgment. Paul proves this by pointing to the specific events of

the Tribulation Period which have not yet occurred on earth, including the ending of the restraining work of the Holy Spirit through the Church, an indicating the Church will be absent from this time of wrath.

Throughout this study I will quote men who espouse the traditional and widely accepted view that this is referring to a religious defection and departure from the truth. But I will also quote and interact with those who adhere to the Rapture view of apostasia. I accept the majority view of expositors which throughout the years have understand the word “apostasia” as having a fixed meaning, referencing spiritual departure or apostasy. But this study will confirm that this will be a specific apostasy that occurs during the Tribulation Period, when the unbelieving world worships Antichrist who deifies himself as God.

There is no question that Paul in 2 Thessalonians chapter two is supporting a pretribulation Rapture of the Church by giving specific reasons why God’s saints could not be living during the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period). But there has been a debate over the meaning of the noun “departure” which is translated as “a falling away” in the King James Version (2 Thess. 2:3).

Some view “apostasia” as a spiritual departure or removal (apostasy) while others see it as a physical departure or removal (the Rapture). In fact, some expositors conclude that if this is a reference to the Rapture occurring before the Day of the Lord that we have a slam dunk case for pretribulationism. But we must remember that a pretribulation Rapture does not stand or fall based upon the meaning of the word apostasia in this text since other Scriptures clearly teach a pretribulation Rapture (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:1-10; Rev. 3:10). Therefore, not interpreting apostasia as the Rapture does not invalidate pretribulationism as Gundry and others argue.

It’s very clear that Paul wanted to reconfirm what he previously taught the Thessalonian Christians about a pretribulation Rapture despite what some false prophets were saying about his alleged eschatological change from a pretribulation to posttribulation Rapture. Apparently some false teachers within the early Church were circulating the error that the Church would not be raptured before the Day of the Lord but that the saints had already

entered the Tribulation Period. This was in opposition to what Paul had previously taught them.

### **An Eschatological Misconception**

Paul begins in 2 Thessalonians 2:1:

**“Now we beseech you** (*make an appeal to you*), **brethren, by** (*on behalf or because of*) **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him** (*the appeal was to correct the error regarding the timing of the Rapture and to confirm the truth about a pretribulation Rapture of the Church*).

Paul speaks of the Rapture in verse one. His appeal is corrective in nature because of the error that was being propagated concerning the timing of the Rapture. Some false teachers were promoting that the Rapture was not pretribulation and that the saints had already entered the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period). But Paul reassures them that our gathering unto the Lord in the air above and into the heavenly home He has prepared for us (John 14:1-3) is the glorious destiny of the Church – not the Day of the Lord. Paul’s appeal was to support pretribulationism. The Rapture reminder is designed to reassure the saints that the timing of this event has not changed.

William Kelly says:

“The comfort of the Lord’s coming is employed as a motive and means for counteracting the uneasiness created by the false presentation that the day (of the Lord) was there.”

In other words, Paul is saying, “I appeal to you on the basis of the Rapture that you should not fear that you are living in the Day of the Lord. The Rapture must take place first. You will be taken home to Heaven before this time and will escape the horrors of the Day of the Lord.” Paul had previously spoken to the Thessalonian Church about the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18). This verse serves as a great source of comfort and hope for both them and us today. Paul speaks about the Rapture in the beginning of this passage to once again confirm that the Lord will return for His beloved Church before the Day of the Lord begins (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9-10). He is

reminding the people of the pretribulation Rapture and their rescue from the terrible events associated with the Tribulation Period (Day of the Lord). Sadly, by the time Paul wrote this letter, many of the saints believed they were already living in the period of the Day of the Lord. For this reason, Paul would have to use the events of the Tribulation Period to correct their misunderstanding and convince them that they had not entered the Day of the Lord. In other words, he would need to reason that they had not entered the Day of the Lord based upon the great apostasy that has not yet occurred in conjunction with the revelation of Antichrist because of the removal all evil restraints on earth.

In making these arguments Paul essentially defends the pretribulation Rapture position of the Church which he had previously taught them. So, in Paul's initial appeal in verse one he reassures the saints that the beloved teaching and blessed hope of the pretribulation Rapture is true. But more convincing evidence was needed since the saints were emotionally stirred and confused regarding the timing of the Rapture, believing they had already entered the Tribulation Period (Day of the Lord).

This is why Paul goes on to write in 2 Thessalonians 2:2:

**“That ye be not soon shaken** (*stirred up*) **in mind** (*do not experience mental agitation, which effects your emotional thinking and mental moorings, but continue to have clear and stable understanding of the truth regarding a pretribulation Rapture*), **or be troubled** (*disturbed, frightened and alarmed*), **neither by spirit** (*a prophetic utterance allegedly from the Holy Spirit but is actually from a false spirit – 1 John 4:1*), **word** (*a false report from a false preacher*) **nor by letter as from us** (*a false letter with Paul's forged signature and confirmed by Silas and Timothy, Paul's partners*), **as that the day of Christ is at hand**” (*is now present, hath arrived, hath set in, or has come*).

The Thessalonian church had developed a major eschatological misconception. Let me put it in layman's terms. Somebody was trying to pull the wool over their eyes! Apparently some of the saints bought into the error and believed they had entered the Tribulation Period based upon prophetic messages and reports from false apostles opposing Paul's teaching on the pretribulation Rapture of the Church. They had concluded

that the Thessalonian Christians had entered the Tribulation Period. The errant teaching probably first came through a “prophetic utterance” in one of their meetings, and then it was further enhanced by a letter claiming to come from Paul himself.

The idea behind the word “shaken” denotes a rocking motion, a shaking up and down, like a building shaken by an earthquake (Acts 16:26) or a ship tossed on a stormy sea. Something had stirred and shaken the hearts of the Thessalonian saints. Someone informed them that Paul was teaching that the Church would pass through the Day of the Lord and that they were presently living during the time when God’s judgment would fall upon the earth. As a result, they had lost their composure about End Time events.

The fact that the “day of Christ is at hand” (the time of God’s earthly judgment during the Tribulation Period – Rev. 3:10) means it “has come.” It is the Greek perfect tense which refers to something that happened in the past and is still occurring. It signifies completed past action with ongoing results. There is almost universal agreement that in the perfect tense it has the sense that this day had already arrived. A variety of renderings convey this thought: “is now present,” “hath arrived,” “is present,” “hath set in,” “is come” or “has come.” In other words, according to the false teaching, the Tribulation Period was already present on earth, and it continued to be present over the earth.

Here is what happened. Someone had given out some false information that the Thessalonian saints had entered the day of God’s wrath and judgment. They made it appear that Paul had changed his position on the timing of the Rapture and told the Thessalonians they would not be raptured before the Tribulation Period and therefore were now living in the period known as the Day of the Lord. The Thessalonians were not worried that the Lord had come; they knew that He had not. But they were worried that the Day of the Lord had begun.

Again, it’s very possible that a letter was written by someone which taught the Thessalonian Church was actually living during the Tribulation Period and they signed (forged) Paul’s name to the letter as if he was teaching that the Church would pass through the Tribulation Period. In essence, Paul

said, “Don’t believe this letter for it is a fake and contains false information.”

The pretribulational scholar Renald Showers, who espouses the apostasy view, remarks: “It appears that at least some of the Thessalonians had departed from the earlier teaching of Paul and his companions concerning the coming of Christ to rapture the church (1 Th. 1:10; 4:13-18; 5:4-11).”

He goes on to say:

“So to prove to them that the Day of the Lord had not already started, Paul says in verse 3, “Let no man deceive you by any means, for that day [the Day of the Lord] shall not come except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition”—who is the Antichrist. He’s saying that the evidence that the Day of the Lord isn’t already here and you’re not in it is the fact that two things that have to happen before the Day of the Lord will take place have not happened yet, namely, the apostasy and the revelation of the man of sin.”

Apparently many of the saints were gullible enough to believe that Paul had changed his pretribulational Rapture position to a posttribulational Rapture position and they were now following the errant teaching that the church had passed into the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period). With a broad prophetic brush, Paul paints the picture that the specific events of the Day of the Lord were not present or occurring on earth and therefore the saints could not be living during the Day of the Lord. Essentially, Paul proves pretribulationism is true and the people were not living during the Day of the Lord by the unfulfilled events of the Tribulation Period – not by mentioning a pretribulational Rapture in verse 3.

Some might argue that two out of the three events do not happen until the middle of the Tribulation Period which proves Paul could not possibly be using the event of worldwide apostasy in verse 3 to prove that the saints were not living during the Day of the Lord. Of course, this conclusion is mere speculation. The error could have been circulating that the Thessalonians had been living in the Day of the Lord for an extended period of time. This would be an alarming teaching that would definitely strike fear in their hearts (2 Thess. 2:2). Therefore, Paul uses the well-known events of

the Tribulation Period, apostasy, the revelation of Antichrist, along with the removal of all restraints of evil on earth to prove the saints were not living during this time of God's wrath. We must let the text speak for itself.

Some Greek texts read "day of the Lord" rather than "day of Christ" (2 Thess. 2:2) but in either case, this "day" refers to the time when Christ will directly intervene in human affairs by bringing destruction upon the world. The expression "day of Christ" (Christos) is found in the Majority of Greek manuscripts while the reading "day of Lord" is found as a variant reading in an older manuscript (Codex Vaticanus). In 1 Thessalonians 5:2 Paul called the Tribulation Period by the name "day of the Lord" (kurios).

If we follow the Majority Greek text reading in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, we can conclude that Paul's usage of the "day of Christ" and "day of the Lord" can sometimes be used interchangeably. This is because both expressions are looking ahead to the time of God's wrath and judgment over the earth. Actually, whether it is Christ's day or the Lord's Day makes little difference from a prophetic standpoint since the intent is to teach that this coming period of judgment flows forth from God, and more specifically from Christ, since He unleashes the judgments upon the tribulation earth (Rev. 5-6).

Are you with me yet? My friend Pastor Bob Shelton used to say, "Don't lose me in these prophetic woods." On several occasions in Scripture the expression "day of Christ" refers to the specific day of the Rapture of the Church (Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Cor. 1:8). But in this case (2 Thess. 2:3) it is pointing to an extended or broad period of time repeatedly defined in the Old Testament as the Day of the Lord (Isa. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 13:5; Amos 5:18; Joel 2:1). It is also defined this way in the New Testament. Peter says, "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (2 Pet. 3:10). Paul also speaks of "the day of the Lord" in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. The *broad* view of the Day of the Lord must be understood as a period of time rather than a singular event. The *narrow* view of the Day of the Lord encompasses the actual event of the Second Coming on a specific day (Joel 2:31). Paul is focusing on the judgment aspect of the Day of the Lord that occurs during the seven-year Tribulation Period.



Once again, in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 Paul uses the truth about the coming of Christ and “our gathering unto him” in the Rapture to confirm the pretribulational Rapture of the Church. He then gives an appeal for calmness (2 Thess. 2:2) in light of the forged and phony letter that had been passed around declaring that he was teaching the Church has passed into the Day of Christ or the Day of the Lord (the Tribulation Period of God’s wrath and judgment). Paul speaks of “our gathering unto him” (the Rapture) in the beginning of this chapter to remind the people that this event had not yet occurred, and the Church would be safely raptured and delivered before the Day of Christ’s/Lord’s wrath begins over the earth. In essence, Paul is defending pretribulationism in 2 Thessalonians 2:1.

Renald Showers summarizes well:

“So Paul is writing to rebut that false teaching, to try to drive home the point, ‘Christians, you’re not in the Day of the Lord. And I’m writing to you on behalf of the teaching I already gave to you about the coming of the Lord to gather us together to Him in the Rapture. I’m writing in defense of that teaching that we’re going to be removed from the earth before the Day of the Lord, and therefore, we as Christians will not be here when the Day of the Lord comes,’ and to drive home to them that the day of the Lord has not started. He says to them in verse 2, “that you be not soon shaken in mind or be troubled neither by spirit nor by word nor by letter as from us as that the day of Christ is at hand.”

If it were true that Paul was now teaching God’s saints are living in the Tribulation Period, the believers were wondering how could he then speak of the Lord’s return as preceding the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 1:10)? And what about those promises that they would not see God’s wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9)? It is very clear that Paul had taught them about the pretribulational Rapture. So, this letter which contradicted Paul’s teaching stirred up a hornet’s nest!

Charles Horne remarks:

“It is amazing how gullible some believers can be when a new prophetic fad appears!”

## When Earth Enters the Day of the Lord

In 2 Thessalonians 2:3-7 Paul goes on to discuss what must take place for the Day of the Lord to be present upon earth (2 Thess. 2:2). In doing this, he gives ample proof that the Thessalonians were not living in the time known as the Day of Christ's wrath or the seven-year Tribulation Period where the Lord unleashes His judgments over the earth.

As we will see in a moment, Paul's main argument or proof for pretribulationism does not revolve around a spatial or physical departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 but a spiritual or doctrinal departure from the truth and ethical norms which will occur during the coming Day of the Lord. The apostasy will occur with the revelation of Antichrist, and all of this takes place because the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit (holding back evil) will not be operative during the Tribulation Period. So, Paul's main point he uses to prove the saints had not entered the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period) revolved around the coming apostasy – not the coming Rapture.

As we dive into the main section of this study, I want to give some running commentary on the way I understand the key verses. Remember that Paul is teaching why the saints cannot be living during the Tribulation Period. His primary focus is not to present the event of the Rapture, but the events associated with the Tribulation Period to prove the saints had not entered the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period). To prove pretribulationism, Paul reasons from the viewpoint of the Tribulation Period. He essentially concludes: "You are not living in the Day of the Lord since these Tribulation events have not occurred on earth."

2 Thessalonians 2:3-7

**"Let no man deceive you by any means (that you are living in the Day of the Lord or Tribulation Period): for *that day shall not come* (cannot be present on the earth), **except there come** (except these events are now present, have set in, or have arrived on earth, signaling the Day of the Lord has begun, is present, and underway as indicated in verse 2 – "at hand"), **a (the) falling away first (THE RELIGIOUS APOSTASY OF THE TRIBULATION PERIOD), and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition (THE****

*REVELATION OF ANTICHRIST WHO IS THE INSTIGATOR OF THE APOSTASY – the revelation occurring in conjunction with the apostasy as explained next);*

**“Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God (*THE REPULSIVE CHARACTER OF THE APOSTASY*). Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth (*holds back or restrains*) that he might be revealed in his time (*the Antichrist*). For the mystery of iniquity (*a New Testament revelation of the Holy Spirit indwelling the Church though which lawlessness is suppressed, keeping evil and spiritual anarchy in check, not allowing wickedness to completely overtake the earth with the emergence and apostasy of Antichrist worship*) doth already work (*in germ or seed form today*): **only he who now letteth (*restrains*) will let, until he (*the Holy Spirit*) be taken out of the way” (*THE REMOVAL OF THE RESTRAINER WHICH RESULTS IN THE APOSTASY – the Holy Spirit is not spatially removed but His functionality of suppressing sin is removed*).****

In summary, Paul says that in order for the Church to be living in the Tribulation Period there must “first” (2 Thess. 2:3) be a specific religious departure that consists of Antichrist deification and worship (event one). This occurs in conjunction with the revelation of the Antichrist who will at a specific point in time reveal his true identity by declaring himself to be God and demanding worship (event two). The first two events are distinct and yet interrelated. Next, the apostasy will occur because of the removal of the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:7) which is the Holy Spirit (event three). Since none of these events have occurred the Church cannot be living in the time period known as the Day of the Lord.

In these verses Paul attempts to correct the error that the Church had entered the Day of the Lord. He points out that the major events of the Day of the Lord had not occurred and there was no evidence that the day had already begun. This is because three events must occur for the earth to officially be in the Day of the Lord – the religious apostasy, the revelation of Antichrist, and the removal of the Restrainer. Hence, the Thessalonian Christians could find comfort in the facts that Paul presents. Since these

Tribulation events have not occurred, there is no reason to be alarmed that they were living during the Day of the Lord.

William Combs makes the case that if “apostasia” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 does refer to the Rapture, then this would not necessarily bring comfort to the Thessalonians. He argues: “If Paul responds by saying that they are not in the Day of the Lord because the Rapture (ἀποστασία) must take place before the Day of the Lord, he would seem to be offering no real proof to allay their fears. That is, he would simply be telling them what he had taught them before, not really responding to their fear of having missed the Rapture. But, however, if he offers proof that the Day of the Lord cannot have commenced by pointing out that they have obviously not seen the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness, events he had previously taught them about, then their fears should be allayed.”

In other words, Combs correctly concludes that the promise of the Rapture at this point (2 Thess. 2:3) would not comfort them since they already believed they were living in the Day of the Lord and the timing of the Rapture was different than what Paul had previously taught them. For this reason, Paul begins informing the saints in verse three, not about the Rapture, but the apostasy and Antichrist which would emerge on the world scene during the Tribulation because of the removal of the restraining work of the Spirit. He mentions three specific events to give ample proof that the saints had not entered the Day of the Lord. Paul made his appeal for a pretribulation Rapture in verse one. He now moves on to prove the pretribulation Rapture position in verses 2-7 by arguing that the events of the Tribulation Period (Day of the Lord) have not yet occurred; therefore, pretribulationism is true. Don't lose heart. Believe in the blessed hope!

The sense and flow of Paul's thought is this. Be reassured that what I taught you about our pretribulation gathering unto the Lord in the event of the Rapture is true (2 Thess. 2:1-2). It will happen just as I taught. The reasons for this are threefold: 1) the apostasy of the Day of the Lord has not occurred, 2) the man of sin who is the leader and instigator of this apostasy has not been revealed, and 3) the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit has not been removed from the earth to bring about the apostasy (2 Thess. 2:3). Case closed! Pretribulationism is true.

## The Debate Among Pretribulationists

### A. *Before or During the Tribulation*

Those who espouse the Rapture view of apostasia conclude that two out of the three events mentioned by Paul occur prior to the Tribulation Period (the Rapture and removal of the Restrainer). But many more expositors, who see apostasia as a religious departure, believe that two out of the three events occur during the Tribulation Period (the religious apostasy and revelation of Antichrist).

The Moody Bible Commentary correctly asserts:

“The Thessalonians could know that the day of the Lord had not yet started because two events within the day of the Lord that would signal its presence—the apostasy and the revealing of the man of lawlessness—had not taken place. The point is not that these two events happen before the day of the Lord, but happen during it, signaling its presence.”

I agree with this conclusion. The two events that will occur *within* the Day of the Lord are apostasy and the revelation of Antichrist. But one event will occur just prior to the commencement of the Day of the Lord (the removal of the Restrainer) which triggers the apostasy during the Tribulation. All the events are linked together and relate to the Tribulation Period to prove Paul’s main argument that the Church is not living in the period known as the Day of the Lord. It makes good sense to conclude that all three events must occur on earth for the Day of the Lord to be present. In other words, all these events must transpire for a person to claim that they are living during the Day of the Lord. But since none of them have occurred, it’s impossible for Christians to be living during the Tribulation Period. The conclusion is that the pretribulation Rapture is still true!

Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2 is not saying that there are two things that must happen before the Rapture. What he is saying is that two events must occur on earth for the Day of the Lord to be present and the saints to be living during this specific period of time. The three events are not Rapture centered, but Tribulation centered, proving that the Day of the Lord had not yet come.

Paul Lee Tan asserts:

“What precisely does Paul mean when he says that “the falling away” (2:3) must come before the tribulation?” ... The apostle Paul refers here to a definite event which he calls “the departure,” and which will occur just before the start of the tribulation. This is the rapture of the church.”

Kenneth Wuest argues in the same way:

“I am driven to the inescapable conclusion that the *hee apostasia* (vs. 3) refers to the Rapture of the Church which precedes the Day of the Lord.”

Tan and Wuest, among others, fail to see that Paul is not looking at an event (a departure) that must occur *before* the Tribulation Period begins but an event that must exist on earth for the Day of the Lord to be *present*, as Paul clearly taught by the previous word construction “the day of Christ is at hand” (2 Thess. 2:2), referring to events that have set in, which are already present, underway, or have arrived on earth, signaling the Day of the Lord has already begun. The expression that the “the day of Christ is at hand” or the Old Testament equivalent expression “Day of the Lord” is already present on earth (verse 2) is exegetically linked to what follows in verse 3 (the apostasy which occurs in conjunction with the revelation of Antichrist).

The apostasy of the Tribulation Period occurs when the Antichrist reveals his identity, the specific time when he claims to be God and people begin to worship him. These events grammatically look back to what others were teaching regarding how the Day of the Lord was already present on earth (vs. 2). In essence, Paul is teaching that these first two events associated with the Day of the Lord (vs. 3) had not set in, they were not present on earth. Hence, the saints could not be living during the Day of the Lord.

Hiebert stresses the same thing:

“As his corrective to the false teaching, Paul names two events [in verse 3] which must occur before the day of the Lord can be truly said to have come.”

The people were told they were already living in the Day of the Lord. Therefore, Paul immediately responds that in the first place, you cannot be

living during the Day of the Lord since the apostasy, which is associated with the Antichrist, has not yet set in. It's not present on earth.

For the reason stated above, Robert Thomas suggests that “these two happenings are conceived of as within the day of the Lord, not prior to it.” Later he writes: “But here in 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul is not discussing the timing of the rapture. He is simply reassuring his readers that “the day of the Lord” had not come. Nor does he at any place in this context (2 Thess 2:1–12) tell his readers that they will at some future time ‘see’ the two initial phenomena of ‘the day of the Lord.’ Had he said that, there would indeed be a problem. But he did not speak of the Thessalonians’ actually seeing the phenomena. He simply stressed the present nonarrival of the phenomena.”

I agree with his conclusion that Paul’s aim is to teach that these first two events occur within the Day of the Lord and since they have not happened, the Day of the Lord has not arrived. To state succinctly, Paul is not viewing the first two events as occurring *before* the Tribulation Period but *after* its commencement. This alone would provide the needed comfort for the saints since many of them had espoused the error that they were living during the period of the Day of the Lord.

The words of comfort were a reminder that these saints were not living during the time frame of the Day of the Lord. It had not come or arrived on earth, it was not present on earth, since the coming apostasy associated with the revelation of Antichrist had not occurred. The adjective “first” (first of all) does not imply that the events must happen before the Day of the Lord but that they must first of all be present on earth for the Day of the Lord to have arrived and the saints to be living during this period of God’s wrath.

John Walvoord concludes:

“While there is apostasy in our midst, the man of sin has not been revealed, and the Holy Spirit has not been removed. All of this constitutes real evidence that the tribulation time has not come and that it cannot come until Christ comes and takes His church home to glory.”

## *B. The thought progression*

Those who disagree with the “religious apostasy” view argue that Paul’s progression of thought is broken if he is referring to apostasy (spiritual departure from the truth). The Rapture view of apostasia is based upon the claim that verse 3 and verses 6-8 are parallel statements of the same truth about the Rapture which Paul had introduced in verse one. It’s a cause-and-effect relationship. Verse three speaks of the Rapture (the apostasia or departure) and after this event comes the revelation of Antichrist. Then, in verses 6-8 the removal of the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit is explained, which indicates the removal of God’s people in the Rapture, through whom the Holy Spirit restrains sin. This event must occur before the Antichrist can be revealed. Allan MacRae, in a letter to Schuyler English claims “we find identical sequence ... because of the mention of the man of sin.”

Gordon Lewis espouses the Rapture view of “apostasia” and stresses that there is a progression in Paul’s thinking: “In this passage we have this progression of thought. Before the outpouring of divine wrath will be “the departure” and then the revelation of the antichrist (2 Thess 2:3–4). But before the antichrist will be revealed the restrainer must be removed (2 Thess 2:6–12). With this understanding, then, the departure (2 Thess 2:3) is synonymous with the removal of the restrainer (2 Thess 2:7).”

Thomas Ice argues that the religious apostasy view of “apostasia” breaks the flow of Paul’s progression of thought: “if ‘the departure’ is some form of apostasy then the parallelism is broken.” He also comments that “the literary construction is another factor that tips the scale in favor of seeing ‘departure’ in verse 3 as the pre-trib rapture event.”

In my opinion, the literary structure and parallelism of the events described by Paul do not make sense if the Rapture is Paul’s main line of thinking. It seems very odd that Paul would mention the Rapture three times in these verses. He does not teach that we are “gathered unto him” (vs. 1) and then immediately use another expression for the Rapture (the departure) in verse 3 (apostasia), and once again imply that the Church will be raptured with the Holy Spirit’s restraining ministry taken away (vv. 6-7).



It is true that the Holy Spirit in a providential way indwells and works through the Church to restrain evil today. So, when the restraining work of the Spirit is removed, it is an indication that the Church will be removed in the event of the Rapture. But even this is not Paul's main argument in verses 6-7. He uses the removal of the restraining work of the Spirit as proof that the earth has entered the Day of the Lord.

Paul's pretribulation argument in 2 Thessalonians 2 is not built upon the event of the Rapture itself but on the events that revolve around the Tribulation Period - the religious apostasy, the revelation of Antichrist who is the center of the apostasy, and the removal of the Restraint which brings about the apostasy. Therefore, there is no need to press a trio of Rapture references to drive home Paul's main line of reasoning. The central thesis of Paul's argument revolves around a religious departure of apostasy and restraining departure of the Holy Spirit which will bring about worldwide rebellion against God and a climactic falling away from the worship of the true God.

Paul's progression of thought does not revolve around three Rapture references but three separate events that will occur to prove the Church had not entered the Day of the Lord. The events described in this passage do not relate to the Rapture, Rapture, Rapture, but the Tribulation, Tribulation, Tribulation. This is because Paul mentions the apostasy of Antichrist during the Tribulation, the exact timing of his revelation on earth during the Tribulation Period, and the removal of the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit which brings about the explosion of apostasy during the Tribulation. All these occurrences will be directly experienced during the Day of the Lord. Therefore, Paul's focus is not on the Rapture happening since this occurs prior to the Tribulation. His main focus is on the events of the Tribulation Period which have not yet occurred to signify the earth and the Thessalonian Christians have not entered the Day of the Lord.

Remember, as the result of the forget letter, it's likely that many of the saints actually believed they were living in the Day of the Lord. So, mentioning the Rapture three times would not bring them comfort if they actually believed they had missed the Rapture or that it would occur during or after the Tribulation Period. Therefore, the Rapture, Rapture, Rapture (a

triple mention of the Rapture) would not give them the proof or assurance they needed to convince them they were not living in the Tribulation Period. However, the specific unfulfilled events of the Tribulation that Paul mentions would give them the necessary proof that the saints were not in the Day of the Lord.

To state it succinctly, Paul does not have to mention the Rapture three times to get his point across about a pretribulation Rapture. He simply reminds the saints of the three events that must occur to confirm that the earth has not entered the Day of the Lord. These events are once again the apostasy, when the man of lawlessness is revealed during the Tribulation Period, because of the removal of the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit. If these three events have not occurred, then the saints were not living during the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period). In essence, this is proof enough that the pretribulation Rapture is still true, and the saints should continue to embrace what Paul had previously taught them.

Despite what Ice suggests, there can be a different understanding of these events which exegetically support Paul's main thesis that the Church cannot be living in the Day of the Lord. In fact, Paul's thoughts are linked together, they are literarily sound, and make good sense as he supports the teaching that the Thessalonians have not entered the Day of the Lord. Paul therefore views the "falling away" as a religious apostasy. He highlights the revelation of the Antichrist as a time when all restraint is removed from the earth, resulting in untold millions of people engaging in worship of Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:4, 10-12).

So what is Paul's main teaching? It's not specifically about the Rapture. Instead, he concludes that these three events must take place on earth to prove that the Day of Christ/Lord has come upon planet earth (Rev. 6:1-19:21). All of them in some way relate to the religious defection and departure from truth – not the Rapture.

- A falling away or spiritual apostasy must take place during the Tribulation Period (2 Thess. 2:3) which culminates in the worship of Antichrist. It will consist of unsaved people openly and defiantly rejecting God and the truth by worshipping Antichrist, who will place

himself, and also an identical statue of himself, in the rebuilt Jewish temple, making the bold claim that he is the only true God that has ever existed (2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:15-18).

- This religious apostasy can only occur when Antichrist who is the instigator of this specific apostasy is revealed (his identity is brought out into the light) during the Tribulation Period (2 Thess. 2:3, 8), fulfilling prophecies related to his End Time movements and wickedness upon the earth. The primary revelation of the man of sin occurs in conjunction with the apostasy that he is promoting which is the deification of himself as God (Matt. 24:15).
- But this specific religious apostasy and revelation of the Antichrist cannot happen until the Restrainer (Holy Spirit) is taken out of the way (2 Thess. 2:6-7) and sets the stage for the End Time apostasy to occur. The sign that the Tribulation Period has come upon the earth is the breakout of unprecedented evil, the rejecting of truth, which results in the worship of Antichrist. The removal of the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit is also an indication of the removal of the Church prior to the Tribulation Period through which the Spirit works to restrain evil.

Hence, there is much to be said about literary parallelism, structure, and flow of thought, as Thomas suggests, when following Paul's line of reasoning in describing these events. There is a definite progression of thought as Paul reveals some key events that transpire on earth to prove the Day of the Lord is present on earth. The argument is clear. Since none of these events have occurred, pretribulationism is true. Jesus will return before the Day of the Lord. Maranatha!

### *C. The early English versions*

Many of those who embrace the Rapture view of apostasia (House, Ice, Woods, etc.) make their appeal, as did Schuyler English, that earlier English Bibles translated the word "apostasia" as departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 because they believed it referenced a physical departure. In supporting the Rapture view, Thomas Ice tries to make the case that King James translators

were responsible for changing the meaning of the word *apostasia*. He states: “By 1611, when the original version of the King James Bible came out, the translators changed the English translation tradition from ‘departure’ to ‘falling away,’ which implied ‘apostasy.’ Such a change was a theological response to the Catholic notion that the Reformation was a revolt against the true church; instead, Protestants saw Catholic beliefs as “the falling away” or “the great apostasy.”

Andy Woods picks up on this same idea that a shift occurred in the meaning of the word *apostasia* with the KJV and Reformation. He writes about earlier Bible translations favoring the word *departure*. “The reason most today have never heard it before (*the Rapture view of apostasia*) is because we are all today following modern English translations that follow the spiritual departing view found in the King James Version ... For those living prior to the advent of the King James Version of 1611, most likely the more popular view that they would have been exposed to would have been the physical departure understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2:3a rather than the spiritual departure interpretation.”

Woods concludes: “... the earliest English translations similarly translate the Greek noun *apostasia* in Second Thessalonians 2:3a as ‘departure’ or ‘departing.’

Of course, this “plausible theory” as Ice suggests, and “most likely” conclusion of Woods is not convincing.

First, it does not overturn the actual meaning and understanding of the noun “*apostasia*” as presented in the Greek text and surrounding context of worldwide apostasy (defection from the truth) within the focus of the Tribulation Period.

Second, no one can say with any degree of certainty that there was a conscious change from the concept of physical departure to spiritual departure or apostasy in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as the Reformation got underway. It’s believed by some that there was a conspiracy of translation going on during the Reformation era to fit with what was happening during this time period. The KJV was translated as “falling away” to counter the

apostasy of the Roman Catholic Church while the Rheims version (Roman Catholic Bible) was translated in a similar way to counter the apostate Reformers.

Some conclude that Beza introduced the idea of apostasy into the translation stream in his Greek text, but this is a misconception. This begs the question, “Why did Beza and those who followed his example change from translations that read departure to revolt or falling away? It’s obvious the change was for accuracy and impact – not a conspiracy to overturn the true meaning of the word to align with what was happening during the days of the Reformation.

The word “departure” can certainly mean a religious apostasy and therefore the change to “falling away” or a “revolt” in various Bibles simply emphasized the graphic nature of this spiritual departure from the truth. The Rheims Bible (produced by the Catholic Church) translates “apostasia” as “revolt,” but I see no reason to regard “revolt” anything other than an honest translation. There is absolutely no evidence that this was some type of conspiracy theory designed by the Roman Catholic Church to counter the rebels who opposed them during the Reformation. As Brainard remarked, “Even the papists get stuff right sometimes!”

Third, the early English Bibles, along with the commentaries and dictionaries (the 1380 Oxford English Dictionary gives examples of apostasy in the works of Wycliffe), indicate that the earlier translators and editors of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 understood departing and departure as references to the apostasy associated with the Antichrist. They regarded departing or departure as two terms that were synonymous with revolt, falling away, apostasy, rebellion, defection, insurrection, and such like.

Fourth, the KJV was not the original source of the words “falling away.” It’s interesting that the oldest English Translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3, found in Wycliffe’s Bible (1380) translated apostasia as “discencioun” (dissension) – a falling out with God. The same Bible (1382) translated apostasia as “departyng away” (or discencioun) and in 1388 it was translated “dissencioun.” These readings demonstrate that the prevailing reading of the Wycliffe Bible portrays apostasia as a spiritual falling away from the

truth, not a physical departure. Wycliffe regarded the word apostasia to mean spiritual departure. The departure or dissension refers to a man having a falling out with God.

Also, early German translations (The Mentel Bible – 20 editions between 1466 and 1518) use the word “dissension” for apostasia. The Luther Bible (1529), Geneva Bible (1560-1569), and Bishops Bible (1568) translated apostasia as “the falling away.” In fact, the Gothic Bible (ca. 350) reads “turning away.” All these versions exhibited a non-physical-departure translation of apostasia, and some of them, like the Wycliffe Bible, were decades before the King James Version. The Latin Vulgate (1590, 1592) reading “discessio” was used in the sense of revolt or spiritual departure as demonstrated by the comments of Jerome, the Vulgate editors, and commentators on the Latin Bible. The alternate reading was dissention.

To state is succinctly, there is no convincing evidence that proves everyone prior to the Reformation and the 1611 KJV believed Paul was teaching about a spatial departure or removal (the Rapture) in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. The concept of falling away and departure were virtually identical in the thinking and mind of the translators. The word “departure” like “falling away” can mean a defection from the truth. By definition apostasy means a departure, an abandoning of a position formerly held (Acts 21:21; Jude 24; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12). So, to conclude that everyone understood this word to mean the “Rapture” prior to the KJV is simply an overstatement not based upon supporting facts.

William W. Combs of Detroit Baptist Seminary responds to this assumption: “Actually, the appeal to early English versions is of practically no importance in settling the issue at hand. For one thing, the translation ‘departing’ does not give any more credence to the Rapture view since the English word departing can be used in both a spatial and nonspatial sense. In Hebrews 3:12 the kjv says: ‘Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.’ Obviously, this ‘departing’ is not a spatial one. Numerous examples could be cited from the kjv. Interestingly, other early versions also translate Hebrews 3:12 as “depart.” The use of this English word to translate ἀποστασία in 2

Thessalonians 2:2 does not mean that these versions were less disposed to the idea of 'religious departure' as the correct understanding of the term.

"As was noted previously, House says that the first English Bible by Wycliffe rendered ἀποστασία as 'departynge.' However, this is probably the reading of the second Wycliffe edition. The original edition apparently rendered ἀποστασία with "discencioun," which is an older spelling of the word dissension. Dissension does not refer to a spatial departing. Also, House's appeal to Jerome's rendering of ἀποστασία as discessio does not prove that Jerome had a spatial meaning in view since the meaning of discessio is not limited to only spatial "departing." In fact, Jerome also used discessio to translate ἀποστασία in Acts 21:21, which unquestionably refers to religious apostasy.

"Additionally, there is no other positive evidence that they would have understood the 'departing' in any sense other than a figurative one. No evidence is forthcoming that anyone in the church ever understood ἀποστασία to refer to a spatial departure until rather recent times. The translation of the kjv, 'falling away,' probably reflects how the passage was generally understood."

"While the English translation 'departure' can refer to spatial departure, there is no evidence that this is the intended meaning of the word in these early versions in 2 Thessalonians 2:3."

Combs concludes with this inciteful analysis:

"Thus, the evidence from the most important sources gives no support for the meaning of "spatial departure" for ἀποστασία. This is probably why this meaning is not found in the standard NT lexicon by Bauer, nor by its predecessor Thayer. The same is true for the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, and the more recent Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament. Considering all the lexical evidence, it seems unlikely that ἀποστασία means "spatial departure" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 ..."

I agree with the conclusions of Combs. I find the evidence weighed and found wanting that the early versions translated the word with the understanding of a physical departure over a spiritual departure.

#### *D. The credible authors*

Woods also sights how the Rapture view of departure (apostasia) is held by credible authors. Yes, I agree with his assessment about this. But there are equally credible scholars who espouse and teach the apostasy view of this word such as John Walvoord, Robert Thomas, Renald Showers, William Combs, John MacArthur, and others. It's interesting that John Walvoord did not finally accept this "physical departure" interpretation. In the first edition of his popular book "The Rapture Question" (1957) Walvoord called the position of Schuyler English a "novel position" but still gave credence to the "physical departure" argument. But after further examination of Gundry's critique of this position, Walvoord rejected this argument in his revised edition of "The Rapture Question" (1979). In Walvoord's commentary on the Thessalonian Epistles, he also argues for the apostasy meaning of apostasia.

#### *E. The timing of apostasy*

Another misconception of those who espouse the physical departure (Rapture) view in 2 Thessalonians is that if apostasy is in view, then this would destroy imminence as it relates to the event of the Rapture. But the timing of this apostasy is not prior to the Rapture during the "last days" of the Church Age but post-Rapture during the End Times which directly relates to the specific time period of the Tribulation Period - the final seven years that lead up to the end of the pre-Messianic Age.

Ice concludes his study on the word apostasia in this way:

"The purpose of Paul's writing to the Thessalonian believers in his second epistle was to comfort them in light of a false teaching that they were in the tribulation (2 Thess 2:2). If *apostasia* refers to a departure from the faith before the tribulation, then how is that a comfort? However, if the departure is the rapture, then there is a comfort since they will be rescued and taken to heaven to be with the Lord before the coming wrath of the tribulation. Also, if this passage does not refer *apostasia* to the rapture, then imminency is lost because they would be looking for a great apostasy rather than Christ. Maranatha!"



Of course, this conclusion cannot be dogmatically defended and is somewhat of a strawman argument.

First, to arrive at this conclusion, Ice once again relates the departure to occurring “before the tribulation.” But the context demands the apostasy (departure) is related to the Tribulation Period with defection from the truth and worldwide Antichrist worship (2 Thess. 2:8-12). Paul is not referring to apostasy that occurs before the Tribulation Period. Therefore, his argument collapses. It’s true that apostasy occurring before the Tribulation Period cannot produce comfort in the saint’s hearts, but Paul’s reasoning is that the saints have not entered the time when the apostasy will occur (the Day of the Lord or Tribulation Period), and this does bring comfort to their hearts! There is great comfort in knowing we will not be part of this End Times madness of spiritual departure and defection.

Second, the doctrine of imminency is not lost if “apostasia” does not refer to the Rapture. This is because the “the falling away” or “the apostasy” does not occur *before* the Rapture but *after* the Rapture. It occurs during Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week with Antichrist’s blasphemous deification of himself and when billions of people refuse to believe the truth, replacing the true God with the false god of Antichrist. The apostasy of the “last days” is not in Paul’s thinking but the apostasy of the “End Times” (Tribulation Period) which is placed within this context. Therefore, the imminence of the Rapture is not affected in any way since this specific apostasy breaks out on earth following the Rapture.

### **Day of the Lord Events**

So what is Paul’s main thesis or point? He is teaching that three specific events (religious apostasy, the revelation of Antichrist, and removal of the Restrainer) must occur in order for the Day of the Lord to be present on earth. But since none of them have occurred the Thessalonian Church cannot be living during the Tribulation Period.

Paul has a progression of thinking that links all the points together. A worldwide apostasy will occur during the Tribulation Period which is connected to the revelation and worship of Antichrist. The reason for this

universal worship of Antichrist is because the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit is taken away through the removal or Rapture of the Church. Once again, when these three things occur upon planet earth, the religious apostasy, the revelation and worship of Antichrist, and the removal of the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit, it's only then that the Day of Christ/Lord will be present on earth. Paul's argument seems to be that the Thessalonians had no proof at all that they were living in the Day of the Lord because the specific events associated with this period of time had not occurred.

Let's state Paul's proposition very clearly. For the Church to be in the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period) three specific events must occur on earth.

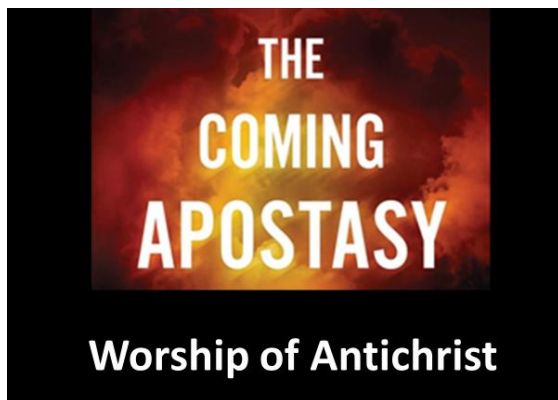
### **1. The religious apostasy of Antichrist Worship (EVENT #1)**

The first event that must occur for the earth to be in the Day of the Lord is the apostasy. This rebellion consists of a religious apostasy, a defection from the truth, and it occurs during the Tribulation Period. It's a general worldwide rebellion against God.

2 Thessalonians 2:3

"Let no man deceive you by any means: for *that day shall not come*, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition."

Paul reasons that the apostasy must occur on earth "first" (first of all) in order for the Church to be living during the time of the Day of the Lord. As explained previously, some interpreters have taken this "falling away" or "departure" (apostasia) from which we derive our English word apostasy to mean something other than religious and spiritual



departure from the truth. They conclude that it means the departure of God's people in the Rapture. However, the English word "apostasy" is a

transliteration of the Greek word *apostasia*. Apostasy by definition is a departure, an abandoning of a position formerly held, a defection from the truth. The Bible is teaching that during the End Times the greatest, worldwide, religious apostasy will take place when people stooped in religious blindness will reject the truth and on a universal scale worship the Antichrist as God (2 Thess. 2:4,10-12).

So, Paul is talking about a religious departure from the faith, and what we have in this passage is called the final apostasy which is to be led by the man of lawlessness (the Antichrist).

David Levy, writing in the "Friends of Israel" magazine, summarizes: "*Apostastize* means to revolt, defect, fall away, or depart from the true God. Paul used *apostasia* to connote a willful, conscious withdrawal from God, resulting in a total rejection of belief in Christ. This *apostasia* will be more than a general apostasy because the text calls it "the apostasy," indicating a specific apostasy. The people deceived will hate the truth, believe the Antichrist's lie, take pleasure in unrighteousness, and remain unsaved. *Apostasia* primarily refers to a situation wherein a rebellious person departs from belief in Christ."

This seems to be what Paul is teaching regarding the apostasy within the Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:4-12). Those who teach that *apostasia* is pointing to the physical departure of the Rapture (spatial departure) and not theological departure from the truth (spiritual departure) must override the context of the End Time Antichrist apostasy that Paul is referencing in this passage. Paul is correlating "the apostasy" (*apostasia*) with the specific apostasy, defection, or falling away from the truth (Antichrist worship) that will break out on earth during the Tribulation Period. Furthermore, the spatial departure was not the understood meaning of the noun *apostasia* during New Testament times. More on this later.

#### *A. The Original Teaching*

J. S. Mabie is said to have presented the view that "the departure" refers to the Rapture as early as 1859 during a prophecy conference in Los Angeles. He later wrote his view in an article published in November 1895 in a periodical called Morning Star. It is also generally recognized that this view

can be traced to a series of articles by E. Schuyler English, entitled “Re-Thinking the Rapture,” which first appeared in *Our Hope* magazine from October 1949 to March 1950. It also appears in his book on “Rethinking the Rapture” (pp. 67–71) which was published by Loizeaux Brothers in 1954. Another proponent of “the departure” as the Rapture was John R. Rice in a book in 1945. However old the Rapture view is, it is clearly Schuyler English who popularized the view.

### *B. The Informed Saints*

The well-respected Bible teacher, Dr. Myron Houghton concluded: “If religious apostasy is a means by which Paul expects the Thessalonians to know whether or not they are in the Tribulation, then he has failed to prove his point because there has always been religious apostasy, even in the time of the apostle Paul, and the Thessalonians were not in a position to distinguish any present apostasy from ‘THE apostasy.’ However, if Paul was referring to the rapture of the church, then the Thessalonians could know with certainty that they could not yet be in the Tribulation.”

Andy Woods also presents a similar idea as Houghton: “Spiritual departures are not abnormal ... Thus, Paul must be using the noun *apostasia* to communicate something more than a mere spiritual departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3a.” Woods suggests that Second Thessalonians was an early letter and therefore the saints did not know much about prophecy and the End Times.

Woods continues:

“So, what is my point? My point is that the concept of an end-time spiritual departure is not something that Paul is focused on early in his ministry. Although it comes a big topic later, it is not a dominant subject when the church first started.”

But later in his book Woods, in my opinion, seems to contradict himself: “The Apostle Paul had already taught the Thessalonian believers about the rapture (1 Thess. 1:1-1 4:13-18) ... but he also began to teach them prophetic truths to such a degree that he asks later, ‘don’t you remember that when I was with you I was telling you these things.’ What Paul is doing

in Second Thessalonians 2 is reviewing ground that he has already covered.”

Respectfully, I disagree with these conclusions of my fellow colleagues and companions in pretribulational teaching. As Woods readily admits, in 2 Thessalonians 2:5 Paul declared: “Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?” He apparently told them about many things including the worldwide apostasy related to Antichrist. These saints did know about the specific apostasy that Paul was referring to in this second letter. Paul undoubtedly talked about these things with the saints in conjunction with his teachings on the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:1-10). In fact, within this Tribulation context, Paul reveals to the saints about the coming apostasy or the “falling away” (the departure) from God and truth with the worldwide worship of the Antichrist and the abomination of desolation (2 Thess. 2:8-12). This is obviously something that was familiar to them.

Lenski observes:

“The first thing on the program is the arrival of the apostasy and the revelation of the man of the lawlessness. The article designates these two as being the only ones of their kind, and v. 5 indicates that Paul and Silvanus had mentioned this apostasy and this man of the lawlessness when they first worked in Thessalonica.”

Paul wrote earlier in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3:

**“But of the times and the seasons** (*the duration and characteristics of the events related to the Old Testament eschatological period known as the Day of the Lord – Isa. 13:6-11; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:28-32; Amos 5:18,20; Zeph. 1:14-18; 3:14-15*), **brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night** (unexpectedly). **For when they** (*the unsaved left behind, who are not part of the Rapture*) **shall say, Peace and safety** (*following the Rapture event – Rev. 6:2*); **then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child** (*with the outpouring of God’s wrath on earth in the Tribulation Period – Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8*); **and they** (*the unsaved left behind who do not participate in the event of the Rapture*) **shall not escape** (*the End Time judgments of the Tribulation Period – Rev. 6-19*).

Paul had no need to write again about the events of the Day of the Lord for he had certainly spoken to them about these things. They did have knowledge about these future events (“yourselves know perfectly”). It’s clear that the saints were taught about the End Times events which would include the Day of the Lord and worldwide apostasy of Antichrist worship. Antichrist is termed here as “the man of sin” (2 Thess. 2:3-4, 8-10). The subject of the Antichrist was common knowledge that had been circulating among the early Christians (1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7). They certainly knew about this great apostasy of the End Times. So, both “the” apostasy and “the” revelation of Antichrist are specific events that are bound to a timetable in God’s prophetic plan.

John Walvoord comments in this way:

“In other words, apostasy which today is general is going to become specific. It will be headed up in the particular person mentioned here as the “man of sin” or a man of lawlessness—a man who is opposed to God.”

I’m not convinced, along with many other expositors, that the Rapture is the meaning of the “falling away” (departure), even though very good men espouse this view which I highly respect such as Dwight Pentecost, Schuyler English, Thomas Ice, Andy Woods, Dr. Houghton and others. But it’s equally true that other scholarly and learned men have taught the spiritual departure understanding of this word such as Edmond Hiebert, Robert Thomas, John Walvoord, Tom Constable, Mal Couch, John MacArthur, Renald Showers, David Levy, and many others.

It seems that Paul alludes to the Rapture of the Church later in his third point when talking about the removal of the Restrainer (Holy Spirit). This is because when the restraining work of the Holy Spirit is removed (2 Thess. 2:7), it indicates the Church has been raptured or removed from the earth through whom the Holy Spirit has worked to restrain or suppress sin. However, to liken “apostasia” to a physical departure seems to be forcing a meaning on this word and looking outside the immediate context to make a pretribulation point. Some expositors stress the difference between a departing and a departure to make the point that the Rapture is in view.

But this is a moot point since a departure from the truth can also be considered departing from the truth.

### *C. The Spiritual Verses Spatial Departure*

All apostasy is essentially religious in nature; it is revolt against God. This seems to be the sense Paul is conveying in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. To define it as a spatial departure seems unlikely from a lexical, contextual, and logical progression of Paul's thoughts.

Edmond Hiebert gives an interesting observation about the word *apostasia* and the falling away: "Nowhere else does the Scripture speak of the rapture as 'the departure.' A departure denotes an act on the part of the individual or company departing. But the rapture is not an act of departure on the part of the saints. In the rapture the church is passive, not active. At the rapture the church is 'caught up' or 'snatched away,' an event wherein the Lord acts to transport believers from earth into His presence (1 Thess. 4:16–17). Everything that takes place with the believers at the rapture is initiated by the Lord and done by Him. Paul has just referred to the rapture as 'our gathering together unto him' (v. 1); why then should he now use this unlikely term to mean the same thing?"

Although Heibert's argument should not be the ultimate argument to determine whether Paul was thinking of spiritual or physical departure, he does make an interesting point in his analogy. This term "departure" does not seem to be in harmony with the nature of the Rapture. We are not departing under our own initiative in the event of the Rapture. We are being translated and transported by God's initiative and power. When Paul explains the exact order of events in the Rapture he uses the word "harpazo" (1 Thess. 4:17) as an explanation for the Rapture – not *apostasia*. Everything that takes place at the Rapture is initiated by the Lord and is described in the terms of being "caught up" (1 Thess. 4:17) or "our gathering together unto him" (2 Thess. 2:1). Again, it also seems odd that Paul would suddenly use another term to describe the same event that he had just spoken about as "our gathering together" in verse one.

Added to this, the wording and flow of Paul's thinking caters to apostasy – not spatial or physical departure. The saints were not to be shaken or disturbed that the Day of the Lord had arrived on the earth (2 Thess. 2:2). The simple reason for not being emotionally distraught over this was because none of the events associated with the Day of the Lord were occurring on earth (2 Thess. 2:3). The basic flow of these verses directs us away from the understanding that apostasia is a reference to the Rapture.

It seems much better to understand that Paul is relating the word "apostasia" to one of the events that must occur during the Tribulation Period to signal that the Day of the Lord is present upon earth. This would be religious apostasy, not the Rapture, since the Rapture does not occur during the Tribulation Period. This is why the Thessalonian Church could not be in the Day of the Lord. The pretribulation Rapture (Paul's original teaching) was still true since none of the events related to the Day of the Lord had occurred, such as the apostasy, the coming of Antichrist, and the loss of the restraining work of the Holy Spirit within the world.

Mike Stallard correctly summarizes: "Couch points out that most conservative interpreters agree that apostasia refers in this context to religious defection. John Walvoord emphasizes that this is true even among pretribulation scholars who would gain by the alternative interpretation. Two reasons reinforce the standard interpretation as defection from the faith. First is the fact that all other occurrences of the noun apostasia in the New Testament and in the Greek Old Testament refer to religious or political rebellion. Second, one must take into account the close association of the man of lawlessness mentioned in 2:3. Since he is described in terms of wickedness and rebellion (2:3–4), it may be more likely that the thought of wicked rebellion is also the intended meaning of apostasia. Consequently, it is much more likely that the word refers to religious defection of some kind rather than the departure of the church."

#### *D. The Definite Article (Nonspecific Versus Specific Apostasy)*

Most authors who reject the doctrinal departure view of apostasia make the point that doctrinal departures were normal throughout history and therefore apostasy could not function as a sign during the Tribulation



Period. But Paul's point is that a specific identifiable apostasy (Antichrist deification and worship) will occur during the Tribulation and become "the departure" of the End Times.

Thomas Ice, who espouses the Rapture view of apostasia, makes his case by concluding that years of apostasy that occurs before the Rapture is not a specific departure like the Rapture. He comments: "The use of the article in this context is meant to denote a one-time event, which the rapture fits into. It is hard to think of how the process of apostasy at the end of the church age could be viewed by believers around the world as an identifiable, one-time event. However, this would not be a problem if that event were the rapture. Further, how could an apostasy be a sign to the church since many New Testament Epistles warn about apostasy in the first century and Jude said it has arrived in his day (Jude 3– 4). Apostasy is a moving target while the Rapture will be a clear event."

Similar to Houghton ("there has always been religious apostasy") and also Andy Woods ("Spiritual departures are not abnormal"), Thomas does not associate the occurrence of apostasy with the Tribulation Period but assumes it occurs before the Rapture and therefore it cannot be a specific identifiable sign to the Church. I would agree with their conclusions if Paul was referring to apostasy occurring today prior to the Rapture. But the immediate context does not associate the apostasy with a departure occurring prior to the Rapture but during Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week. Paul goes on to define the apostasy as something which takes place during the Tribulation Period.

The apostasy occurs when Antichrist (the man of lawlessness) is worshipped on a universal scale during the Day of the Lord. In fact, this will be something that is very "identifiable" and in some ways a "one time event" when Antichrist demands worldwide worship of himself (Mark 13:14; Rev. 13:15). However, this horrific apostasy will continue up to the Second Coming of Christ (Rev. 19:20; 20:10). Paul's point is that the man of lawlessness will lead a rebellion against God by opposing and exalting himself above every so-called god or object of worship, taking his seat in the temple of God, displaying and declaring himself to be God during the Tribulation (2 Thess. 2:4).

Lewis Sperry Chafer identifies the apostasy as the final form of religious union and profession of non-Christians during the Tribulation Period. He offers this understanding of the definite article with apostasia: “Here the definite article isolates this apostasy from every other. It precedes the Day of Jehovah, and is evidently that final form of religious union and profession that will obtain in the tribulation after the true church has been removed from the earth.”

The use of a definite article (“the”) with departure means that that the falling away is a specific and special apostasy that has not previously occurred. The basic function of the article “is to point out an object or to draw attention to it. Its use with a word makes the word stand out distinctly” (Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 137). Again, Lenski states: “The article designates these two (*the apostasy and Antichrist revelation*) as being the only ones of their kind.”

Paul is not speaking of “A” falling away but “THE” falling away. It’s something striking and terrible to contemplate. The “apostasy” indicates a particular apostasy that will occur in the future. In other words, apostasy which today is general is going to become specific during the Tribulation Period. Paul’s use of the definite article reveals that he had in mind not a general flow or trend prior to the Rapture, but a specific, identifiable act of apostasy during the Day of the Lord.

Andy Woods suggests that “the apostasy” fits the Rapture since it is an “instantaneous manifestation” (1 Cor. 15:51). Of course, the article does not always mean that something must be an instantaneous event (1 Tim. 4:1; Jude 3) and this would only be true if the text was actually referring to the Rapture. In other words, there is no time limitation connected with the definite article; it can also relate to long periods of time (Rev. 20:10). And finally, the apostasy (Antichrist worship) which Paul is referencing is not the general trend of apostasy of the Last Days but the apostasy that occurs during the Tribulation Period which will at one point be quickly implemented on society and become the universal law over planet earth (Rev. 13:15).

To summarize, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Paul is not talking about a physical departure of the Church but a doctrinal and spiritual departure from the truth that will occur during the Tribulation Period. With his use of the definite article, “the rebellion,” or “the great revolt” he clearly points to a specific apostasy which will characterize the End Times during the Tribulation Period. It’s an apostasy associated with the Antichrist which would definitely be a recognizable event. The apostasy which springs forth from the revelation of Antichrist would emerge on the world scene and become a universal law over the earth.

Mal Couch contributes this to the meaning of the word:

*“Apostasia is a compound word, apo (from, away from) and stasia or histemi (to stand), thus, a ‘standing away from,’ or ‘positioning oneself from.’ Apostasy has the article attached, which makes the word definite, the apostasy.”*

The next remarks were taken from a message given by Dr. Renald Showers. “The word apostasia literally means rebellion and abandonment – rebellion against God’s rule and abandonment to lawlessness. The Greek text emphasizes a future time when the apostasy will begin – a beginning point in world history. The word has a definite article (“the”) in front of it. This indicates the apostasy will be unique, distinct, and different from past apostasies. Past apostasies have never been worldwide, a universal apostasy, rebellion from its very beginning, from day one, here upon planet earth. This apostasy will come suddenly. It’s not progressing slowly through a period of time. It will be apostasy in the absolute sense and total abandonment from God’s rule from its very beginning.”

I agree with the conclusion of Dr. Showers as he summarizes Paul’s teaching on a future apostasy that will overtake the earth.

2 Thessalonians 2:10-12 highlights the heinous nature of this future apostasy: “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.”

To not receive truth and refuse to believe truth is apostasy! This is a total rejection and abandonment of the truth by billions of people living during the Tribulation Period. These unsaved people will defiantly reject the truth, refusing to receive the message of the Gospel. Instead, they will believe the lie of the Antichrist that he is the true God. As a result, God will send strong judicial delusion upon their minds, and they will take the mark of the beast, sealing their fate forever (Rev. 14:11).

The great rebellion (religious apostasy) Paul is referring to is the future worship of Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:4) and the total defiance against God and rejection of the truth (2 Thess. 2:10-12) by billions of people on a worldwide scale, who are living during the Tribulation Period. The context in which “apostasia” appears seems to clearly point to religious departure from truth - not a physical departure of the Church.

#### *E. The Greek noun apostasia*

Once again, it seems unlikely that Paul would speak about the physical gathering together of the Church again, as he previously did in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, when using the term “apostasia” in verse 3. This word connotes a personal and deliberate abandonment of a formerly professed position or view, a defection or rejection of former allegiance. This religious connotation of the term and similarly related terms are used throughout the New Testament (Acts 21:21; Jude 24; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb 3:12; 2 Tim. 4:3-4). In other words, apostasy is viewed as a religious departure from the faith (what Christians believe and embrace as truth). In fact, the only time that this exact noun (apostasia) occurs in the New Testament, it definitely points to apostasy from the leadership and law of Moses (Acts 21:21). Although Paul was not committing apostasy, the word “apostasia” was understood in this way.

The “Theological Dictionary of the New Testament” states: “apostasía. Based on apostátēs (politically a ‘rebel,’ religiously an ‘apostate’). ... Eschatological apostasy is the issue in 2 Th. 2:3, either with or prior to the man of lawlessness. Resting on Jewish tradition, this will be the decline of Christians into error and sin in the last days (cf. Mt. 24:11–12).”

The “Greek English Lexicon based upon Semantic Domains” by Louw, Nida gives this entry of the word apostasia: “to rise up in open defiance of authority, with the presumed intention to overthrow it or to act in complete opposition to its demands—‘to rebel against, to revolt, to engage in insurrection, rebellion.”

The “Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament,” by Spiros Zodhiates, gives this conclusion on apostasia: “apostasía; gen. apostasías, fem. noun from aphístēmi (868), to depart. Departure, apostasy. Occurs in Acts 21:21 translated ‘forsake’ and in 2 Thess. 2:3, ‘a falling away’; Sept.: 2 Chr. 29:19; Jer. 29:32.

“Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words” concludes: “apostasia 2× a falling away, a rebellion, apostasy, Acts 21:21; 2 Thess. 2:3.”

As previously mentioned, in Acts 21:21 the same word “apostasia” appears under the umbrella of apostasy: “And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake (apostasia) Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children, neither to walk after the customs.” Paul was accused of committing apostasy or spiritual departure away from the Law of Moses. The exact word (apostasia) is used here to indicate apostasy.

Andy Woods dodges this conclusion by claiming it is a different context than 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Nevertheless, you cannot dismiss the fact that the exact same word is being portrayed elsewhere as apostasy in the Bible. Despite the conclusion of Woods, this is not “a shallow way of determining a word’s meaning.” All exegetes of Scripture compare word meanings throughout the New Testament, especially when they appear somewhere else in the same form. This is not a shallow assessment of the word apostasia.

It's true, as Woods properly concludes, that there is a related noun (“apostasion”) which represents a bill of divorcement or separation (Mark 10:4), so someone can physically go away, but this is certainly not convincing evidence that “apostasia” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 relates to a literal separation, a physical going away of the Church in the Rapture. To

hook up the meaning of Mark 10:4 with 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is a giant leap of faith. Apostasion has a fixed meaning here of divorce. It does not in any way relate to a physical separation or departure of the Church.

The physical departure (Rapture) conclusion, which is sometimes based upon the use of “apostasion” (physically going away) fails on several counts. First, it ignores the lack of lexical evidence for the noun “apostasia” relating to a literal or spatial separation. Second, it also ignores the context in which it appears in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 (the religious departure of Antichrist worship). The physical meaning of a related word in one passage of Scripture does not mean that it appears in the same manner in other texts of Scripture. In this case, there is no lexical evidence that “apostasion” overrides the spiritual meaning of “apostasia” in this text of Scripture.

In fact, there are many other words that are in the apostasia family which indicate spiritual departure and defection from the truth – not spatial departure. Lee Brainard’s research on the related different parts of speech is helpful on this point. “The nouns are *apostasies* (sedition, rebellion, apostasy), *apostasia* (sedition, rebellion, apostasy), *apostates* (rebel, apostate, deserter, runaway), *apostasion* (divorce), and three rare forms: *apostatis* (sedition, apostasy), *apostatesis* (rebellion), and *apostases* (rebellion, apostasy). The adjective is *apostatikos* (rebellion). The family has its own verb forms: *apostateo* (rebel) and *apostasiazo* (cause to rebel). The verbs are accompanied by the gerund *apostateon* (rebellious) and the adverb *apostatikos* (rebelliously).”

A fair assessment of the noun apostasia leads us to the conclusion that Paul is not referring to the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

#### ➤ Root Words

Those who espouse the Rapture view will often conclude that the root verb “aphistemi” (related to the noun apostasia) can also refer to a physical departure and therefore this is another way to conclude that Paul was talking about the physical departure of the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. In other words, some will take the leap from religious to physical departure by pointing to the cognate verb form of “apostasia” which is “aphistemi,”

meaning “to withdraw, remove, depart, leave.” It appears 14 times in the New Testament and is used both in a spatial and non-spatial sense. The leap from spiritual departure to physical departure happens by assuming that the verb meaning carries over to the noun meaning.

E. S. English succinctly states: “since a noun takes its meaning from the verb, the noun, too, may have such a broad connotation.” Davey goes further when saying, “Since the root verb has this meaning of ‘departure’ from a person or place in a geographical sense, would not its derivatives have the same foundational word meaning.”

But this is where the mistake happens; making the cognate verb determine the meaning of the noun (*apostasia*).

Paul Feinberg is correct when arguing:

“In other words, one rests the rapture interpretation of this text not on *apostasia* but on the verb *aphistemi*. This simply cannot be done. In most cases the meaning of the underlying verb carries over to its derivative noun. But there are instances where this is not the case, and to do so leads to false conclusions. ... There is no reason to understand Paul’s use of *apostasia* as a reference to the rapture.”

The entry for this word in the “The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament” is this: “*aphístēmi*. Transitive ‘to remove’ either spatially or within a relationship, ‘to win over,’ ‘to seduce,’ middle ‘to remove oneself,’ ‘to resign,’ ‘desist,’ ‘fall away.’ Only the personal use is important theologically, and in the LXX the term becomes almost a technical one for religious apostasy (Dt. 32:15; Jer. 3:14; Is. 30:1), usually from God or the Lord, and leading to idolatry and immorality. In the NT this sense occurs in Acts 5:37; 15:38; 19:9. Decline from God is the meaning in Heb. 3:12. In 1 Tim. 4:1 apostasy involves capitulation to heretical beliefs as an eschatological phenomenon. An absolute use is found in Lk. 8:13 and cf. Rev. 3:8.”

Woods correctly reveals that the root word does represent apostasy in Luke 8:13, 1 Timothy 4:1, Hebrews 3:12 (a removal from the truth), but then concludes that it appears more often as representing spatial departure. As

a result, he says that apostasia must therefore refer to spatial departure. In response to this finding by Woods and others, the Acts 21:21 verse is the first key to the correct interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Acts 21:21 is undoubtedly an apostasy or departure from a religious standard of truth. A rumor was circulating that Paul was teaching people to defect from the truth revealed through Moses.

Usage or the appearance of the actual word apostasia should count far more than its etymology. Researching the meaning of a specific word as it appears in the New Testament is practicing an historical-grammatical hermeneutic; it is not an attempt to hook together unrelated contexts. In fact, we cannot do justice to our contextual efforts until we have done justice to our lexical efforts. Added to this, every time the noun is used in the LXX, it carries the meaning of ideological departure (Josh. 22:22; 2 Chron. 29:19; 33:19; Ezra 4:19; Isa. 30:1; Jer. 2:19). In fact, apostasia along with its cognate form appears over forty times in the LXX and every time it has the meaning of religious or political defection.

It can also be determined that the use of the noun (apostasia) in relation to the immediate context refers to the danger of spiritual apostasy occurring during the Tribulation Period (2 Thess. 2:8-15) – not physical or spatial departure. The “apostasia” was used by Paul to speak of the specific End Times apostasy which will occur in connection with the revealing of the man of lawlessness and the placement of his image (abomination of desolation) in the Holy Place at the beginning of the Tribulation (midpoint of the 70th week) just as Jesus taught at Matthew 24:15.

Here is my point. Building a case that “apostasia” means physical departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 because its root verb “aphistemi” has more references to physical departure than spiritual departure is not impressive. Root words should not overturn the actual understanding of a word in relation to its original meaning and context. Of course, since “apostasia” does refer to apostasy elsewhere (Acts 21:21) the root findings that support apostasy can be significant as a secondary way of confirming the spiritual meaning of “apostasia.”



As already mentioned, the verbal form “aphistemi” does occur three other times with the meaning of spiritual departure (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12). This word means to depart, withdraw, to remove, to revolt, to stand off, to fall away. It’s clear that there is added lexical evidence to support the word “apostasia” as meaning doctrinal departure (apostasy). But the point to be made here is that one should not build an entire case for a 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Rapture on the root verb (aphistemi) rather than the actual Greek noun used (apostasia). I do not believe this is practicing proper hermeneutics. In the end, usage is the only trustworthy arbiter of the meaning of a word. Juggling root words and cognates doesn’t tell us how a word is actually used or what sense the person using it intends to convey.

In other words, the meaning and use of a root verb is not to be the key determinative factor for establishing the meaning of a noun. Many times, a noun develops a specialized meaning based on its usage. It seems that this is the case concerning the noun, apostasia, which occurs only in 1 Thessalonians 2:3 and Acts 21:21 in the New Testament. Although the root verb may be a help in establishing a meaning, it is only a guide. The “apostasia” noun meaning can first be established on its own by looking where the noun appears elsewhere and what the context demands of its interpretation.

The word used in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is not the verb ‘aphistemi’ but the noun “apostasia.” There is no reason to interpret the meaning of this word (apostasia) based upon its literal root definition or etymology which sometimes appears as spatial departure. In other words, nothing in the Greek language demands that the noun “apostasia” must have the same literal meaning as some of its cognates.

Some have argued that when we override the basic meaning of a word in Scripture we can create what is known in hermeneutics as a root fallacy (the meaning of a word can be deduced from its roots). In other words, Greek derivatives do not necessarily always carry the same precise meaning as the original word.

D. A. Carson comments:

“One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its

components. In this view, meaning is determined by etymology; that is, by the root or roots of a word.”

Words can be related but not identical. Therefore, we must be careful of importing a meaning of the verb (“aphistemi”) into the noun (“apostasia”) which is not related to the word in its special context. The meaning and connotation of any New Testament word is determined primarily from the immediate context itself and to a lesser extent where the same word is used elsewhere, let alone its root words. We must be careful we do not play “semantic gymnastics” with Greek cognates to establish the specific meaning of a word in a particular passage.

H. Wayne House spends a lot of time digging himself into what seems to be a cognate fallacy, a fallacy where you assume a noun’s meaning based on the verb form or vice versa. But there is an 800-pound gorilla that remains in the room. Where does the exact noun apostasia mean a “spatial departure” in Koine literature and the standard definitions found in the Greek lexicons? This brings me to another line of argumentation often used for the physical Rapture view in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

➤ Classical Greek

Another argument used by those who embrace the Rapture view of apostasia is their appeal to Classical Greek instead of Koine Greek in order to establish the meaning of apostasia as a spatial departure and thus the Rapture. But we must remember that Koine New Testament Greek (the common Greek of the people in that day) replaced Classical Greek in about 300 BC and lasted until about 300 AD. But some conclude that apostasia is a later construction of the Classical Greek which they argue was used as a spatial departure.

This is what some term as the lexical fallacy. Outside of Koine Greek literature a spatial departure may be a secondary meaning, but it certainly is not the primary meaning. The flaw of this argument is simple – the Scriptures were written in Koine Greek and not Classical Greek! It is the original Koine Greek Scriptures which are inerrant, and God breathed (2

Tim. 3:16). Actually, one is incapable of producing a single document in all of Koine literature where apostasia actually means a “spatial departure.”

Any solid proof that 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is referring to the Rapture cannot be built by playing semantics with other languages such as classical Greek or by reverting to other derivative words in the Greek outside the context of what Paul is teaching. The word is “apostasia” and the common understanding of this word has been a religious falling away from truth and defiance against God. Scripture interprets Scripture. Again, there is the immediate comparison we have of the same noun in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and Acts 21:21. In fact, as we are about to investigate, every church father who commented on apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 regarded it to have the sense of revolt or rebellion – not a physical departure in the Rapture. Nor do any of the major Lexicons and dictionaries, (Bauer, Thayer, etc.) teach such.

#### ➤ Lexical Evidence

Is there any strong lexical evidence that would prove that the noun “apostasia” can carry the meaning of “physical departing,” let alone in 2 Thessalonians 2:3? This is where the rubber meets the road.

In my opinion, Liddell and Scott’s Greek Lexicon has been misused to prove a physical Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 even though it actually lists religious departure as the primary meaning. 1. defection, revolt, v.l. in D.H. 7.1, J. Vit. 10, Plu. Galb. 1; esp. in religious sense, rebellion against God, apostasy, LXX Joshua 22:22, 2 Thessalonians 2:3. 2. departure, disappearance, Olymp. in Mete. 320.2.

Some pounce on this second understanding of the word apostasia (departure, disappearance) and in my opinion exploit it as the foundation of their claim that apostasia is a reference to the Rapture. But what needs to be emphasized is that Liddell and Scott’s Greek Lexicon lists the primary meaning of apostasia as “defection, revolt” especially in a religious sense, rebellion against God, apostasy. This actually opposes the teaching of the Rapture fulfilling the meaning of apostasia. Only as a secondary sense does the lexicon have “departure, disappearance.” However, the lexicon only

recognizes this secondary sense as found in the sixth century A.D. document written by Olympiodorus, a mid-six-century philosopher, which was a document of science regarding the effects of heat and cold on solids and liquids.

The word “apostasia” in this document was used for the departure of liquid from a substance when heat is applied. In other words, it’s a reference to evaporation! Of course, evaporation is a technical word that has nothing to do with physical or spatial departure of a human being moving from point A to point B. It’s clear that it is not legitimate to lift the translation of departure out of this scientific context and export it to a non-scientific context to prove the human departing of the Church into Heaven at the event of the Rapture.

To conclude that there is good lexical evidence for the word “apostasia” as meaning physical departure from this Greek lexicon is a problematic conclusion since this document appears four centuries after the completion of the New Testament! Truthfully, this meaning (physical or spatial departure) is not found in the standard New Testament lexicon by Thayer, Bauer, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, and *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Why? It’s because the noun “apostasia” should not be understood as a physical departure or disappearance in the Greek language.

In Moulton and Milligan’s, *“The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources,”* it is demonstrated that this term is only used in the political or religious defection sense. It is never used in a spatial departure sense (pp. 68–69).

The standard Greek lexicon for Patristic Greek (the church Fathers) is Lampe, which has the primary meaning of apostasia as “revolt, defection,” and it gives only one example for the sense of a spatial departure. This one instance is found in a New Testament apocryphal work on the tradition of the Assumption of Mary. Again, this “physical departure” sense is outside the Koine period dated to the later 5th century A.D.

So, where's the beef? Where is the solid lexical evidence that supports "apostasia" as referring to a spatial or physical departure? One simply cannot find the "physical" meaning of this noun "apostasia" in 99% of the standard New Testament Greek lexicons. On the contrary, there is good lexical evidence that confirms the doctrinal departure understanding of "apostasia." In my opinion, those who espouse the Rapture departure view cannot have their lexical cake and eat it too. This is because the specific noun does not support a spatial or physical departure.

➤ Early Church Fathers

In addition to the lack of lexical findings for a physical departure, the early Church Father's comments on 2 Thessalonians 2:3 do not contain any thoughts about the Rapture or spatial departure when speaking about apostasia.

Lee Brainard in his extensive research on the word apostasia concluded: "Aside from the legal sense of divorce, the patristic usage during the four centuries that followed the close of the apostolic era universally falls under the umbrella of the abstract departure. One of these instances, in the late fourth century, was *departure from sin*. The rest of the instances can be summed up under the general heading of *revolt*. Seven percent of these instances involve political revolt. The other ninety-three percent involve religious revolt."

He goes on to say:

"This restriction to abstract departure is highlighted when it comes to the patristic understanding of 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Not a single father treats *apostasia* in that passage as a reference to physical departure. This is telling. If *apostasia* bore the sense of physical departure in the Koine era, surely a few fathers would have proposed the rapture interpretation. But not did. "

In other words, the predominant sense for the word apostasia in the early Church Fathers (Basil, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodoret, Origen, Justin Martyr, Chrysostom, etc.), by far, is the sense of religious apostasy. They did not see a Rapture in their understanding of this word in 2

Thessalonians 2:3. There is overwhelming evidence of how the early Church Fathers understood the word.

Paul Feinberg, who formerly taught Greek at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has investigated the usage of the *apostasia* family. Here is what he had to say: “If one searches for the uses of the noun ‘apostasy’ (*apostasia*) in 355 occurrences over the 300-year period between the second century B.C and the first century A.D., one will not find a single instance where this word refers to a physical departure.”

Lee Brainard again comments:

“Not only does *apostasia* never bear that sense from 250 BC to AD 500, but an examination of its three most common cognates: *apostasies*, *apostates*, and *apostateo* - totaling 645 examples - in the Roman era (150 BC to AD 150) doesn’t turn up a single example where they are used for the physical or spatial *departure* of a human being from one location to another.”

These results cast a shadow on the claim that *apostasia* can bear the sense of physical or spatial departure. The exact noun *apostasia* has a clear and fixed meaning that relates to apostasy.

Even H. Wayne House admits:

“Although the noun used in the sense of spatial departure is not the normal meaning ... during New Testament times, the word is found with the meaning in time periods before and after the New Testament era, and it is likely have been understood this way at least sometimes.”

His conclusion does not sound very convincing to me, and not even to himself. There is no trace of *apostasia* being used for physical departure before the New Testament era. Nor is there any trace of it for five centuries afterward.

In my opinion the approach of looking to classical Greek and verb forms that refer to spatial departure to try and prove that 2 Thessalonians 2:3 refers to the Rapture results in a fishing expedition. This is because 1) the use of the noun “*apostasia*” elsewhere along with its corresponding cognates refer to apostasy, 2) the standard conclusion in all Greek lexicons is that *apostasia* refers to apostasy in a religious sense, 3) we derive our

English word apostasy from apostasia, and 4) the context speaks of the specific apostasy which will occur during the Tribulation Period. Those who espouse the view that departure means religious apostasy are not ignoring the linguistics of this word as some would suggest nor the context in which it appears. Which brings us to our next point.

#### *F. The Context*

Of course, when studying word meanings, we cannot always settle the issue of the meaning of a word like “apostasia” on linguistics alone. This means we also must consider the context in which a word appears.

I concur with MacArthur’s conclusion on this:

“Some have suggested, on questionable linguistic evidence, that this refers to ‘departure’ in the sense of the Rapture. Context, however, points to a religious defection, which is further described in verse 4. The language indicates a specific event, not general apostasy which exists now and always will. Rather, Paul has in mind the apostasy. This is an event which is clearly and specifically identifiable and unique, the consummate act of rebellion, an event of final magnitude. The key to identifying the event is to identify the main person, which Paul does, calling him the ‘man of sin.’”

The fruit of my study has revealed that linguistic evidence for an actual spatial departure of the Church in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is weak. The word itself and context decidedly points to a religious departure. The event of apostasy is strongly indicated by that which follows. The apostasy occurs when the man of sin is revealed, which is the second event that must occur for the Day of the Lord to be present upon earth.

Andy woods repeatedly mentions in his book that “Context is king” and “location, location, location” are most important. I would agree with this. Woods argues that the extended context should be considered. Yes, it is important to examine the extended context, but the meaning must always be determined by the immediate context. Woods also realizes this and basically argues that since 2 Thessalonians 2:1 speaks of the Rapture and the Restrainer being removed from the earth implies the Rapture (2 Thess. 2:6-7), then the rest of the context demands the same interpretation (2

Thess. 2:3). But this is an assumption that is not built upon what the actual context is teaching regarding the End Time Antichrist apostasy.

Woods concludes, "If 'context is king' and both the noun and the verb of *apostasia* can refer to a physical departure, it is only natural and logical to supply a physical departure understanding to this word in Second Thessalonians 2:3a. Such an interpretation finds ample support in both the extended and immediate context. Why would I read into this word *apostasia* a doctrinal departure when the context is very clear that he is dealing with subject related to a physical departure?"

In response to the argument of Woods, I have not found one instance where the exact noun "apostasia" refers to spatial departure. But Woods goes on to convey that the noun and verb "can refer to a physical departure." Those who hold the doctrinal departure viewpoint could say the same thing about the noun and verb for they too can refer to a spiritual departure (apostasy). He also states that "it is only natural and logical to supply a physical departure understanding to this word in Second Thessalonians 2:3a." But it would be more logical and natural to conclude that Paul within the immediate context was talking about spiritual and doctrinal departure when the Antichrist establishes worldwide worship and declares himself to be God. This is the epitome of all apostasy!

If we want to be context conscientious, as Woods seems to be, we should readily see that religious apostasy is the way the word is being used within this End Times context. Paul is teaching that there is the matter of "the departure" (apostasy) which occurs in conjunction with the revelation of Antichrist. But there is also the Restrainer who is holding back this apostasy from occurring in the world today. Those who espouse the apostasy view of the word *apostasia* do consider the context.

So, in Paul's first point, he is stressing that there will be an unprecedented, End Time, climactic, religious apostasy ("the apostasy") that would come upon the earth prior to the Second Coming of Christ and this apostasy would indicate that the Day of Christ/Lord has begun. This is a rebellion or revolt, a departure, an abandoning of a position from biblical orthodoxy. Paul is focusing on the rebellion that will take place within the Tribulation Period which will culminate in the worship of Antichrist Himself during the



second half of Tribulation. He is emphasizing the apostasy related to the worship of Antichrist since this specific and special act of apostasy is placed within the context. People turning from God's truth in utter defiance against God to worship the Antichrist, who will sit in the Jewish temple and claim to be God (2 Thess. 2:4) is the End Time apostasy that Paul is referencing.

The Lord asked, "Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, [to the earth], shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). When Jesus speaks of "faith," (a specific type of faith) He probably means the kind of faith (persevering faith) that the poor widow had in this parable. But the prophetic nature of this parable, which should be viewed through the lens of a Jewish perspective, indicates that when the Lord returns in His Second Coming to earth (not the Rapture) there will only be a remnant of Jews who are true to Him and it's this small remnant that will be saved at the Second Coming (Zech. 13:7-8). This indicates how widespread the apostasy of Antichrist worship and unbelief in Christ will be during the days of the Tribulation Period.

Once again, Paul's use of the definite article in the Greek language (the falling away, apostasy, departure) reveals that he had in mind not a general flow or trend of apostasy during the last days, but a specific, identifiable act of apostasy during Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week.

Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament concludes:

"The implication is that the man of sin is hidden somewhere who will be suddenly manifested just as false apostles pose as angels of light (2 Cor. 11:13ff.), whether the crowning event of the apostasy or another name for the same event.:

The apostasy will be a blasphemous act of unprecedented magnitude which has never before been witnessed on a universal scale. The apostle identifies the apostasy by naming the key character connected with it as "the man of lawlessness: (2 Thess. 2:7) and the worship of this man as God (2 Thess. 2:4). Understanding who the Antichrist is and how the world will worship him is a prerequisite to identifying this specific End Times apostasy.

Once again, Andy Woods reasons this way:

“Moreover, the definite article in front of the noun *apostasia* lends support to the physical departure view by conveying its instantaneous rather than gradual nature.”

The implication of Wood’s remark is that apostasy sets in slowly and not instantaneously. Therefore, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 the Rapture must be in view instead of apostasy. Like Thomas Ice, Andy Woods seems to be viewing the apostasy as something that gradually occurs prior to the Rapture throughout the Church Age, during the Last Days. However, Paul is not talking about apostasy slowly emerging through the Church centuries but “the apostasy” (a specific act of apostasy) that occurs during the End Times (Tribulation Period). Yes, there have always been doctrinal departures and apostasies – but not “the apostasy.” So, in response to the comment of Woods, one could just as easily conclude that the definite article lends support to a specific apostasy that will occur during a specific time period (the Tribulation Period).

As previously discussed, the definite article is not contextually limited by a specific time designation (1 Tim. 4:1; Jude 3). It can relate to long periods of time (Rev. 20:10). However, if we want to use the instantaneous nature analogy, as Woods suggests, “the apostasy” will be a specific explosion of apostasy that occurs when the Antichrist sits in the temple of God, declaring himself God, and requires the whole world to worship him. Men will worship Antichrist to save their hide! The apostasy will set in so fast and furious that it will by far overshadow other apostasies throughout the history of the world.

Renald Showers comments:

“We must ask this question, what can possibly trigger this when instantly the whole world is sold out to complete lawlessness? It will be the Rapture. Apostasy will be the result of the Rapture. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be alive on the earth when this takes place!”

When the Rapture takes place and all true Christians leave the earth, this apostasy will eventually overwhelm the human race. Great throngs of people who have not truly known God personally will engage in this specific

apostasy. It will be a climactic End Time revolt, an aggressive departure from God that will ultimately be expressed in the worshipping of the Antichrist who claims to be God.

Robert Thomas states this about the government and religion of the Antichrist: “This worldwide anti-God movement will be so universal as to earn for itself a special designation: ‘the apostasy’—i.e., the climax of the increasing apostate tendencies evident before the rapture of the church. Following and in conjunction with the apostasy will come the unveiling of a mighty figure embodying everything opposed to God. His whereabouts before his unveiling are not given. He will be alive for years before his unveiling, but his dramatic public presentation will occur after the rebellion begins.”

Notice that Thomas emphasizes the *climax* of apostasy which occurs after the Rapture and during the Tribulation. It’s important to realize that Paul could not be specifically referring to the general apostasy that would occur before the Rapture for the simple reason that this would destroy the teaching of an imminent (any moment) return of Christ for His Church (1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:12). It would essentially mean something must happen before the Rapture could occur. The Rapture is not contingent upon apostasy occurring. But if the apostasy occurs during the Tribulation Period with the worldwide acceptance and worship of Antichrist, then the entire passage makes sense.

Paul is therefore teaching that an apostasy (departure) from truth will occur during the Tribulation Period, the likes of which the world has never witnessed before. In other words, this apostasy must be in the world for the Day of the Lord’s wrath to be present on earth (2 Thess. 2:2). This is his main thought and teaching. Since this specific apostasy has not occurred the Church could not be living during the Tribulation Period (Day of the Lord).

Now imagine this! There is coming a time when mankind will on a worldwide scale worship the false Christ! This does not surprise me. Today religious people worship statues, relics, popes, and other personality figures. It should be no surprise to us when we read in Scripture how

people throughout the entire earth will become mesmerized in worshipping the Antichrist. If a man can bow down and kiss the pope's feet, who claims to be Christ's replacement on earth, I believe this person will be a prime candidate to worship the Antichrist who claims to be God.

It's clear that "the falling away" or "the apostasy" is Satan's pursuit to dethrone God during the Tribulation Period, so he can be worshipped universally, fulfilling his original fallen desire to be like God (Isaiah 14:13-14). It seems that the united lexical and contextual evidence prove with unmistakable clarity that "the apostasy" does not represent the Rapture, but the Antichrist's insurrection against Almighty God.

Revelation 13:4 prophetically declares:

"And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who *is* like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?"

The spirit of apostasy and antichrist is already in the world (1 John 4:1-3) but it will reach its pinnacle when it's centered in the actual person and worship of the Antichrist. Paul is therefore teaching that a doctrinal and religious departure will occur on planet earth to signal that the Day of the Lord has commenced upon the earth. The fact that this departure or apostasy did not yet occur would be ample proof to these saints that they were not living in the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period). So, Paul makes it very clear. The Church could not be in the period of time known as the Tribulation Period (Christ's or the Lord's Day) because this specific apostasy ("the falling away, the departure") had not yet come upon planet earth.

To further substantiate or confirm Paul's understanding of the word departure, he concludes that the "mystery of iniquity" (a secret work of lawlessness) or apostasy had already begun (2 Thess. 2:7), but this was only a prelude and germ form to what was coming in the future Tribulation Period, when the full-blown apostasy would occur on earth after the Rapture. The mystery is that a specific restraining influence throughout the earth would keep the full blossoming of evil and apostasy from occurring. More on this in our final point.

This thought of worshipping the Antichrist leads to Paul's next point on the revelation or unveiling of Antichrist to the world which results in the ultimate expression of lawlessness and rebellion against God during the Tribulation Period.

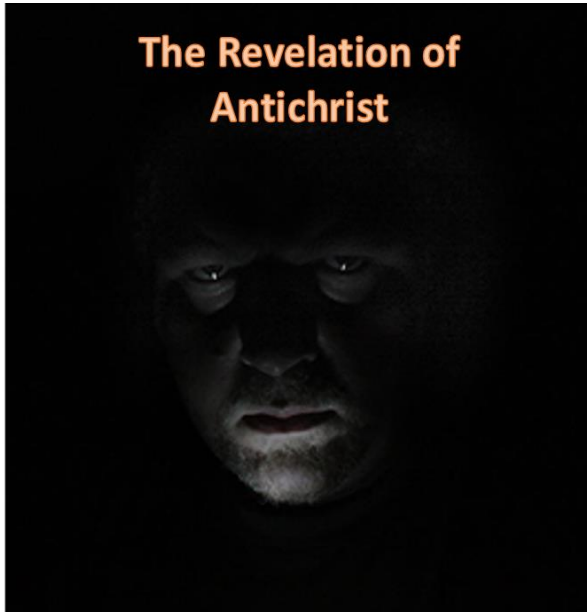
**CONCLUSION - EVENT #1:** The Church could not be living during the time period of the Day of Christ/Lord (Tribulation Period) since the specific apostasy of the Tribulation Period has not occurred with the universal worship of Antichrist and Satan in a total defiance against God and rejection of the truth (2 Thess. 2:4, 10-12). Therefore, the teaching of the pretribulation Rapture is true.

Before studying our next major point, let me give you the big picture. I believe the "physical departure" view of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 fails on all several levels.

- It fails when appealing to early English versions since there is no evidence that the translators understood apostasia as a "spatial departure."
- It fails when appealing to ancient Classical Greek over the Koine Greek language in which the Bible was written.
- It fails on the ground that the standard meaning in the Greek lexicons is spiritual departure with a noticeable absence of the meaning of physical departure in 99.9% of the Greek lexical sources.
- It fails by assigning the meaning of physical departure to the noun "apostasia" based upon verbal cognates or a similar noun that does not properly relate to the understanding of the word in the context of 2 Thessalonians 2:3.
- It fails when considering the overall context in which the word appears which involves a general worldwide apostasy (departure) of the End Times deification and worship of Antichrist.
- It fails when searching the early Church Fathers who lived closest to the apostles. They did not espouse a spatial departure view when commenting on this word in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

## 2. The revelation of the Antichrist (EVENT #2)

The second event that must occur for the earth to be in the Day of the Lord is the specific revealing of Antichrist's identity at the midway point of the Tribulation Period and throughout the second half of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week. This specific revelation will occur when Antichrist shakes his fist into the heavens and declares himself to be the only true God that has ever lived. Paul's second point is that the Antichrist must arise on the world scene "first" (first of all) in order to bring about this worldwide apostasy.



2 Thessalonians 2:3-5 again declares: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for *that day shall not come*, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed (*his true identity*), the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God (*fulfilling the prophecies of both Daniel and Jesus - Dan 9:27; Matt. 24:15; Rev 13:1-8*), shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?"

The Greek adjective "first" or "first of all" (v. 3) in this setting and context is linked together with the revelation of the man of sin. The rebellion and the revealing of the man of lawlessness are not two disconnected or unrelated events but should be seen as a two-fold unifying event. The word "first" refers to both events that must happen for the Church to be living in the Day of the Lord. Paul groups the first two events together. He declares that "first" the universal worship of Antichrist will occur which is directly connected with the revelation of "the man of sin" or the revealing of his true identity during the End Times. Then secondly, he later explains that the

Restrainer (the Holy Spirit) will be taken out of the way to give way to this climatic apostasy of the End Times.

It's clear that Paul links his first point about the religious departure (apostasy) with the defining moment of Antichrist's revelation of his true identity when he declares himself to be God. Paul is teaching that "the man of sin" must be "revealed" on earth for the Church to be living in the Day of the Lord. Since this specific revelation of Antichrist has not occurred, the Church could not have entered this time of God's wrath and judgment.

Paul also concludes in 2 Thessalonians 2:8:

*"And then shall that Wicked (a personal reference to the Antichrist – "wicked one") be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming."*

Paul states the exact timing of the revelation of Antichrist: *"Then (during the Tribulation Period) shall that Wicked be revealed."* He earlier explains about the abomination of desolation and worship of Antichrist that occurs when he is revealed in the world during the Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:3). Paul's second point is clear. Since the Antichrist was not yet revealed in the world, the Church could not be living in the Day of Christ/Lord. They had not entered the Tribulation Period as the false prophetic utterances had concluded.

In a general way, the revelation of the Antichrist includes the prophecies about the "little horn" (Dan. 7:8) and "the prince that shall come" (Dan. 9:26) who makes a strong covenant with Israel (Dan. 9:27) while controlling ten kings in the Revived Roman Empire (Dan. 7:24-25; Rev. 17:12). The Antichrist will break his covenant with the nation of Israel in the middle of the Tribulation Period and begin to deify and promote himself as the only true God and mock Jesus Christ when placing a statue of himself in the Jewish rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Dan. 11:31; 12:11). Both Old and New Testament prophetic texts teach these truths about the revelation of the Antichrist.

In a more specific way and contextually, according to Paul's teaching, the revelation of the man of sin (2 Thess. 2:3), his specific identity, will occur

when he commits a specific blasphemous and dastardly deed. It is the time when he “opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God” (2 Thess. 2:4). In other words, when the Antichrist demands worship from all people on earth, he will not only reveal who He is but the true nature of himself.

Case in point: None of these prophecies related to the appearance of the Antichrist in the world could be witnessed by the Thessalonian Christians. Therefore, they could rightly conclude that they were not living during the days of the Tribulation Period.

Of course, many saints will be able to know the identity of the Antichrist during the End Times. It seems very probable that the man of sin will be identified by some people living on earth when he makes a covenant with Israel to begin the 70th week of Daniel (Dan. 9:27a). However, when he breaks the covenant three and a half years later (Dan. 9:27b), he will be openly recognized for who he really is – the Antichrist. Many other Tribulation saints will be able to calculate the letters of his name which also have corresponding numerical meanings attached to them in some specific language (Rev. 13:18).

After the Rapture and during the Tribulation Period people will be saved and there will be an increase in the knowledge of the End Time prophecies of the writings of Daniel and Revelation (Dan. 12:4). Therefore, the revelation of the Antichrist will be known by tribulation saints living during the Day of the Lord. But there is a specific revelation that Paul is alluding to in this passage which refers to the time when the Antichrist openly, in utter defiance against God, reveals himself to be God and commits the great apostasy of the End Times. It will be at this specific time when he reveals the true nature of his identity. He is the Antichrist, who is against Jesus Christ, seeking to defame and dethrone Christ, claiming to be the only true God that has ever lived.

2 Thessalonians 2:4 states succinctly that the specific apostasy and revelation of Antichrist revolves around pagan and sacrilegious worship: “Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is



worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.”

In Paul’s thinking, the key revelation and identifying mark that proves he is Antichrist has to do with his dastardly deed of deifying himself, presenting himself as God, and causing billions of people on earth to worship him. This event, the abomination of desolation, already spoken of by Daniel and Christ (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 21:11; Matt. 24:15) will be the specific event and time when Antichrist reveals his true nature and character before the world, identifying himself as the false Christ of the End Times.

Dispensationalists who hold to the pretribulation Rapture and believe in the literal interpretation of Scripture, believe that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt and exist during the End Times. This is why 2 Thessalonians 2:4 states that the Antichrist will initially sit in the temple (the symbol of God’s presence) and declare himself as God, committing the act of self-deification and desecrating the Jewish Temple. He will also erect a statue of himself in the temple (Rev. 13:15-18).

The world will engage in the most shocking, blatant idolatry, and apostasy ever seen on planet earth. On a global scale, Antichrist, aided by the false prophet, will set up a statue of himself as a symbol of his deity and worldwide worship. This blasphemous image will be erected on the temple grounds in Jerusalem and become what Scripture designates as the “abomination of desolation” (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; Matt. 24:15) that will remain intact until the Second Coming of Christ (Dan. 12:11).

What Jesus and Paul are teaching has an obvious and undeniable connection with the teachings of Daniel 9:26, 27; 11:31, 36, 37; 12:11 and therefore demands a literal interpretation. Paul’s argument in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is that God will not allow the Antichrist to be revealed until the time of the Tribulation (“and that man of sin be revealed”). Since the Antichrist had not arisen on the world scene, the Thessalonian saints could not be living during the Tribulation Period. Of course, this will be true for all of God’s Church Age saints. We will not pass into the Tribulation Period.

John Walvoord makes an interesting observation: “It is quite illuminating that the Thessalonian church early in the Church Age experienced what today is called posttribulationism, the idea that the Rapture occurs after the Day of the Lord has begun. Posttribulationism usually makes the Rapture a phase of the second coming of Christ to set up His kingdom. It is clear that Paul denied this teaching and affirmed that the Day of the Lord, which includes the activities of the future world ruler, must follow rather than precede the Rapture of the church.”

Paul’s point is clear as he brings his first two arguments together. The revelation of the personal Antichrist (man of sin) on the world scene along with the apostasy, Antichrist’s blasphemous self-deification and desecration of the Temple, are unique and unmistakable events that occur during the Day of the Lord. Since these events have not happened, the Day of the Lord could not have arrived. And praise God, it never will arrive for Church Age believers!

**CONCLUSION - EVENT #2:** Since the Antichrist has not been revealed on earth at the present time proclaiming Himself to be God, the Thessalonian saints and Church could not be living in the prophetic time period which Paul identifies as the Day of Christ and elsewhere the Day of the Lord (the Tribulation Period). Therefore, the apostolic teaching of the pretribulation Rapture is true.

### **3. The removal of the Restrainer (EVENT #3)**

The third event that must occur for the earth to be in the Day of the Lord is the removal of the Restrainer. This event occurs before the Tribulation Period begins and includes the removal of the Church. It’s the removal of the Holy Spirit’s restraining work that eventually results in the worldwide apostasy. In other words, Paul reasons that since the restraining influence is



still present on earth, and worldwide spiritual anarchy has not broken out, the Church has not entered the Day of the Lord.

2 Thessalonians 2:6-8

**“And now ye know what withholdeth** (*Greek – “katecho” – to hold back, detain, retain, suppress*) **that he** (*the Antichrist*) **might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity** (lawlessness) **doth already work: only he** (*a reference to the Holy Spirit*) **who now letteth** (*restrains wickedness, sin, and apostasy*) **will let** (*hold back or suppress*), **until he** (*a reference to the Holy Spirit*) **be taken out of the way** (*a specific reference to the removal of the Holy Spirit’s restraining influence upon the earth as a result of the Rapture of the Church*). **And then** (*during the Tribulation Period, when the Holy Spirit’s restraining influence is removed on earth*) **shall that Wicked** (*a personal reference to the Antichrist – “the lawless one” who is the epitome of human darkness and spiritual lawlessness*) **be revealed** (*disclosed*), **whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming”** (*the Second Coming of Christ to earth and the destruction of Antichrist - Rev. 19:20*).

Just as the rebellion (apostasy) is linked to the revelation and worship of the Antichrist, so the removal of the Restrainer is linked to the emergence of the Antichrist and apostasy in the world. Paul’s final point is that a restraining influence is occurring in the world today, keeping apostasy and total abandonment from God in check. In other words, the Spirit’s restraining work, as He indwells and works through the Church, suppresses, or holds back evil to a certain degree and stops total apostasy, spiritual anarchy, lawlessness, and wickedness from completely overtaking the present world. The Bible does not teach Dominion Theology or that the Church will Christianize the world and bring in the Kingdom. However, it does teach that the Church, through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, has a certain amount of restraining influence on the progression of evil in the world.

Paul reasons that this restraining influence will only be removed after the Rapture occurs and during the Tribulation Period (Day of the Lord) when the Antichrist is revealed to the world. This can mean only one thing. Since the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit (through the Church) is still

occurring in the world, the Thessalonians Christians could not possibly be living during the Tribulation Period. In other words, if the Holy Spirit's restraining ministry was still present on earth, it means the Church is still present on earth (not raptured), since the Holy Spirit indwells the Church (1 Cor. 6:19; Rom. 8:9).

In short, these saints had not entered the Day of Christ or Day of the Lord for the Church was still present on earth with the Holy Spirit indwelling them, allowing evil to be suppressed in some measure, keeping total apostasy and universal spiritual anarchy from occurring. Of course, this also portrays a pretribulational Rapture. The Tribulation Period cannot begin until the Restrainer is removed, who indwells the Church, indicating the removal of the Church prior to the Day of the Lord.

There have been various views concerning the identity of the restrainer. Dr. Pentecost lists five of them as follows: (1) the restrainer was the Roman Empire, (2) the restrainer is human government and law, (3) the restrainer is Satan, (4) the restrainer is the Church, and (5) the restrainer is the Holy Spirit. Others have identified Michael the archangel as the Restrainer.

It's hardly worth commenting on most of these views because of their faulty character. For instance, why would Satan try and restrain sin since "a house divided against itself cannot stand" (Matt. 12:25). Also, the personal pronoun "he" is given to the Restrainer which does not make sense grammatically if it is referring to human government. Of course, the Roman Empire died out hundreds of years ago. It's also true that the Church alone cannot be the restrainer because the Church needs the power of the Holy Spirit working through her to be salt and light in the world (Acts 1:8; 10:38; Rom. 15:13; 1 Thess. 1:5). However, the Holy Spirit working through the Church can act as a restraining influence in the world today. This seems to be what Paul is telling the Thessalonian Christians.

Myron Houghton suggests:

"Nevertheless, in verse six, something is doing the restraining, while in verse seven, the restrainer is a person, so the Church could be involved in the restraining process as the Holy Spirit works through His Church Age saints."

Please note that the Bible does not say the Holy Spirit will be taken “out of the world” but “out of the way” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). The personal presence of the Holy Spirit will be needed on earth during the future Tribulation Period to convict great multitudes of people which will in turn be saved (Rev. 7:9-14). The restrainer is the person of the Holy Spirit who today is holding back evil and apostasy through His Church but in the coming day all the restraints will be removed, and the world will enter a time of unprecedented apostasy and wickedness.

This Spirit’s removal does not refer to His spatial removal from earth but rather “a stepping aside” of His specific influence and function on earth to hold back sin. The concept of the Spirit’s removal means that His restraining influence is taken “out of the way” but the Spirit’s presence is not gone or absent. However, although the removal of the restraining work of the Holy Spirit on earth does not mean the spatial removal of the Spirit, the removal of His restraining work does indicate the removal of the Church from the earth in the Rapture. This is because the Holy Spirit has been working through the Church to retain wickedness and total apostasy. If the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit is no longer at work on earth during the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period), it’s because the Church has been raptured and removed from the earth prior to this time. So, Paul gives a very strong argument here for a pretribulation Rapture.

The Holy Spirit of God is the only Person with sufficient, supernatural, sovereign power to restrain or hold back sin and wickedness. He may work through the Church to accomplish His restraining ministry in the world but behind everything is the providential working and miraculous power of the Holy Spirit moving among the nations of the world in restraining evil and keeping the earth from moving into a state of total spiritual anarchy.

Hiebert again comments:

“Our identification of the Restrainer must ultimately be determined by the question, What person is able to hold back the efforts of Satan? To effectively counteract and restrain the personal activities of Satan demands a person, and one that is more than human. Only a supernatural person can truly frustrate the supernatural workings of Satan. This would at once rule out human agencies as well as all evil supernatural agents. Only a superhuman Restrainer can do the work.”

MacArthur similarly comments:

“The power that holds back Satan from bringing the final apostasy and unveiling of his Satan-possessed false Christ must be divinely supernatural. It must be God’s power in operation that holds back Satan, so that the man of sin, the son of destruction, won’t be able to come until God permits it by removing the restraining power.”

But the Spirit does not work in a vacuum. He uses God’s people as instruments of His restraining work in the world. In other words, the working of the Holy Spirit through Church Age saints (their testimony and stand against sin) keeps sin and wickedness in check to a certain degree within this world. Without the Holy Spirit working through the Church to suppress sin, the earth would turn into a place of total spiritual anarchy and rebellion against God. With the Church raptured from planet earth and the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit taken away, Satan will begin to overtake and control the earth in an unprecedented way. As Pastor Steven Cole remarked, “Quite literally, all hell will break loose on earth.” This is not a slang statement but a true and literal conclusion of what is going to occur when all restraining influence is lost.

Some object to the Holy Spirit being the Restrainer on the grounds that “what withholdeth” in 2 Thessalonians 2:6 is neuter (neither masculine nor feminine). But this is no problem for two reasons: (a) The neuter is sometimes used of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–14). (b) In 2 Thessalonians 2:7 the word “he who now letteth” (hinders) is masculine and poses no problem regarding the Holy Spirit as a person restraining sin prior to the Tribulation Period.

E. W. Rogers states it like this:

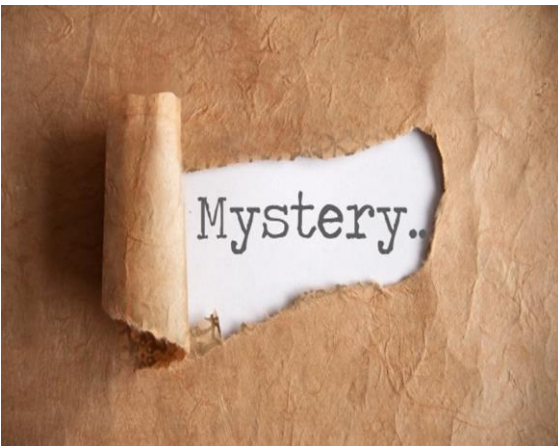
“It is Something and Someone who wittingly, purposefully, and designedly holds it in check *with the view* to ensuring that the Man of Lawlessness is revealed in his own proper time.”

It must be stressed that grammatical gender is not the same as personal gender. The fact that a word is in the neuter gender has nothing to do with its personal gender. The grammatical gender does not tell us anything about the personality or non-personality of any word. Nothing whatsoever.

The gender must be decided on other factors. The Bible repeatedly identifies the Holy Spirit by giving Him personal pronouns, indicating personhood (John 14:17; 26; 16:8, 13-14).

In any event, when the Church leaves the earth in the Rapture, the Holy Spirit will be taken out of the way in the sense that His unique restraining ministry of lawlessness through God's people will be removed. The removal of the Restrainer at the time of the Rapture must obviously precede the Day of the Lord since the restraining work occurs in conjunction with the revelation of Antichrist in the world during the Tribulation Period. Again, Paul's teaching is a very strong argument for the pretribulation Rapture. The Thessalonians were not in the Tribulation Period because the Rapture had not yet occurred since the Holy Spirit's restraining influence, through the Church (the Body of Christ), was still operative in the world.

Until the Rapture and Tribulation Period begins, Paul concludes that there would be a certain amount of lawlessness, evil, and apostasy occurring in the world. He states, "For the mystery of iniquity (*lawlessness, transgression, wickedness*) doth already work" (2 Thess. 2:7). What did he mean by this? He means that there is already apostasy and wickedness in the world today (2 Tim. 3:1-13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Jude 1) but it is proportionately small in comparison to what it will be like during the Tribulation Period when Antichrist is worshipped and evil is running ramped throughout the earth (Rev. 9:21; 18:23). In other words, the spirit of rebellion that characterizes the work of the future Antichrist is also present in the world now, although not in its ultimate and worst form.



What did Paul mean by the "mystery of iniquity" which is already occurring in the world? The noun "mystery" (mystērion) is one of the prophetic mysteries of the New Testament (Rom. 16:26; 1 Cor. 2:6-12; Eph. 1:9; 3:3-5; Col. 1:25-27). A mystery in the New Testament is a new truth previously hidden and unknown before its revelation in the Church epistles and present dispensation.

In this case the mystery is that prior to the prophetic fulfillment of a future period of End Time lawlessness that climaxes during the Tribulation Period (Day of the Lord), there would be a restraining influence that will keep this total apostasy and abandonment of God from overcoming on the earth. However, Paul also concludes that this lawlessness or spirit of disobedience to God and the truth was already stirring beneath the surface. Nevertheless, the exact “mystery” which was not revealed in the Old Testament refers to the Holy Spirit’s restraining influence within the world during the Church Age, holding back or suppressing evil through God’s people (the Church) which is designed by God to keep Satan from overtaking the earth with total spiritual anarchy and apostasy before his divinely allotted time.

Once Satan’s leash is removed He will move quickly to bring about the apostasy that will eventually result in a total departure or abandonment of truth during the Tribulation Period, ultimately ending with the worldwide worship of Antichrist as explained in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. Again, this specific restraining influence of the Holy Spirit in suppressing universal lawlessness and apostasy over planet earth, during the Church Age and prior to the Day of the Lord, was not revealed in the past revelation of the Old Testament. It was only introduced in the epistles.

As early as Genesis 6:3 the Holy Spirit is attributed to restraining evil on the earth. Then later He is seen in this same role in Isaiah 59:19b, John 16:7–11, and 1 John 4:4. But the Spirit’s unique restraining influence on a global basis through indwelling the Church was never revealed in the Old Testament. Paul explains about this mystery in 2 Thessalonians 2:7.

The Expositors Bible Commentary comments:

“The special presence of the Spirit as the indweller of saints will terminate abruptly at the *parousia* as it began abruptly at Pentecost.”

This restraining influence will be lost over the earth because of the Rapture of the Church through whom the Spirit had been working for more than several thousand years. Once again, it is actually the Church that is removed from earth at the time of the Rapture, but the Holy Spirit will



remain on earth without His previous indwelling and restraining ministry of evil through the Church.

**CONCLUSION - EVENT #3:** The Holy Spirit's restraining influence of sin and evil through indwelling the Church (1 Cor. 6:19) has not ceased on earth. This is because the apostasy and events associated with the removal of the Spirit's restraints, such as the worship of Antichrist, believing the lie, deception, and judicial blindness from God (2 Thess. 2:4, 10) are not occurring on earth today. Therefore, the Church cannot be living in the Day of the Lord when the Spirit's restraining ministry ceases, and the End Time apostasy has overtaken the earth. This once again means that what Paul previously taught these saints about a pretribulation Rapture is true. There was no need to doubt the apostolic teaching and Word of God regarding God's saint's being raptured prior to the Day of the Lord.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, let's give ten specific reasons why the "falling away" (departure) does not refer to the Rapture of the Church.

- The Biblical usage of the exact noun ("apostasia") elsewhere points to something sinful, rebellious, and which is against God's truth (Acts 21:21). There is not one instance where this specific noun refers to spatial departure. It bears the sense of apostasy. The related Greek nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs within the family tree related to apostasia predominantly point to a spiritual departure, revolt, sedition, rebellion, and deserter from the truth. Furthermore, the noun apostasia cannot be overturned by merely looking at the root word "aphistemi" which sometimes refers to spatial departure. In fact, Paul knew exactly what the apostasia word group meant, since he used the verb form of apostasia (aphistemi) in his letter to Timothy to also indicate apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1). This religious connotation of a departure from truth is repeatedly seen throughout the Bible (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:3-4; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 24).
  
- The KJV English phrase "falling away" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is the Greek word "apostasia." Its basic meaning is "to go away from,"

- "depart", or "to change one's position from one state to another." The normal understanding of this word has always been a reference to religious or spiritual defection from the truth. Interestingly, the actual English word apostasy (a defection and departure from truth) is derived from this Greek word.
- The evidence for "apostasia" referring to a spatial or physical departure (the Rapture) does not have strong lexical support. One Greek lexicon (Liddell and Scott's Greek Lexicon) assigns departure or disappearance as a secondary but not primary meaning of the word apostasia, sighting a document that contains this understanding which was written four centuries after the completion of the New Testament. This means that nearly all the lexicons mention nothing of a spatial departure or disappearance. One simply cannot find the "physical" meaning of the noun "apostasia" in 99.9% of the standard New Testament Greek lexicons. On the contrary, there is good lexical evidence that confirms the doctrinal departure understanding of "apostasia." The lexical evidence is on the side of a spiritual and religious departure – not a spatial or physical departure. Added to this, the noun in the Septuagint (LXX) always points to religious apostasy (Josh. 22:22; 2 Chron. 29:19; 33:19; Ezra 4:19; Jer. 2:19), usually from God or the Lord, which leads to idolatry and immorality.
  - All the early Church Fathers (Basil, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodoret, Origen, Justin Martyr, Chrysostom, etc.) interpreted 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as a religious apostasy – not a spatial removal. The overwhelming consensus of the Fathers regarded the Antichrist as the architect or instigator of the apostasy that defiles the whole world at the end of the age.
  - When directly speaking about the procedural events of the Rapture, Paul uses the word "harpazo" as the catchword for the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:17) - not "apostasia" (departure). Being "caught up" implies God's initiative and power in rapturing His saints who are passive in the event of the Rapture. The basic understanding of the word departure does not properly represent the actual event of the Rapture since it can imply initiative on the part of the saints.

- There is no convincing evidence that early English versions of the Bible, and other earlier Bibles in different languages, supported the spatial understanding of the word “apostasia” or that the people and translators understood it in this way. Early Bibles not only used the word “departure” but also rendered the word as “dissentation” and “turning away.” Bibles prior to the KJV rendered the word with the same understanding and idea of a “falling away” or fall out with God. The general understanding of this word has not changed over the years of Bible translation. The appeal that early English versions portrayed apostasia as the Rapture has no merit and should not be used to press the spatial or physical view of “apostasia” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. The concept of falling away and departure were virtually identical in the thinking and mind of the translators. Falling away may be a paraphrase of apostasia, but that does not mean it is not an accurate translation.
  
- Contextually, Paul is referring to a specific event, the apostate worship of Antichrist (the man of lawlessness) as God, and the unprecedented rejection of God and the truth which occurs on a universal scale. The End Time apostasy of Antichrist will not only be *against* Christ but *replace* Christ with a worldwide explosion of pagan worship. Paul speaks of this apostasy to prove the Tribulation Period had not begun on earth (2 Thess. 2:8-12). Essentially, it was not “at hand” or present and in progress on the earth (2 Thess. 2:2). Therefore, Paul proves pretribulationism is true, not from the viewpoint of a pretribulation Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, but the unfulfilled events of the Tribulation Period related to the apostasy, Antichrist, and the removal of all ethical restraints.
  
- The flow of thought in these verses does not revolve around the Rapture of the Church but the rebellion or religious apostasy of the End Times to prove the Day of the Lord had not arrived on earth as some were teaching (2 Thess. 2:2). The focus is on the Tribulation Period and the apostasy that occurs during the Day of the Lord in conjunction with the identity of Antichrist being revealed to the world when he boldly claims to be God. The saints were previously taught about this coming worldwide apostasy and would understand

what Paul was referring to (1 Thess. 5:1-3). Furthermore, the subject of Antichrist was common knowledge being circulated among the saints (1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7). In addition, this unique and universal apostasy of Antichrist worship occurs because of the removal of the Holy Spirit's restraining influence over the earth which implies the Church will be raptured. This is because the Holy Spirit restrains evil through the Church. But the real emphasis of Paul is that Hell will literally break loose on earth during the Tribulation Period, resulting in this projected End Time apostasy.

- Paul does not have to mention the Rapture three times to get his point across about a pretribulation Rapture (2 Thess. 2:1, 3, 7). This is highly unlikely. In fact, many of the saints had accepted the false teaching that they might be living during the Day of the Lord. For this reason, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Paul does not begin by reminding them about their physical departure in the Rapture. Why? It's because this would not comfort them if they truly believed they were living in the Day of the Lord. Instead, he informs them about the spiritual departure of apostasy, the revelation of Antichrist, and the removal of the Restraint, which are events that will be played out during the Tribulation Period. Once again, he speaks of these events to prove that the saints were not living during the Day of the Lord. This day was not "at hand" or present on earth (2 Thess. 2:2). Hence, they could rest easy knowing that Paul's pretribulation Rapture teaching is true.
- Equally scholarly and learned men have remained consistent in interpreting the word "apostasia" as a religious departure or defection (apostasy) such as John Walvoord, Edmond Hiebert, Robert Thomas, Tom Constable, Mal Couch, Paul Feinberg, William Combs, John MacArthur, Renald Showers, David Levy, and many others.

Walvoord concludes this about the Rapture understanding of apostasia: "English (*Schuyler English*) is joined by the Greek scholar Kenneth S. Wuest, but their view has not met with general acceptance by either pretribulationists or posttribulationists. A number of pretribulationists have interpreted the apostasy in this way as the departure of the church, but the

evidence against this translation is impressive. In that case Gundry, seconded by Ladd, is probably right: the word refers to doctrinal defection of the special character that will be revealed in the day of the Lord. In this instance pretribulationists can agree with posttribulationists without agreeing with their conclusions on the passage as a whole.”

No matter what view we espouse on 2 Thessalonians 2:3 (spiritual or physical departure), we can be reassured and filled with joy and expectation (Phil. 3:20) that God has promised His Church rapture and not wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 2:1-9; Rev. 3:10). When the Scriptures are interpreted historically, literally, grammatically, and contextually the Bible reveals that the Church will be raptured and rescued from a coming seven-year Tribulation Period (Day of the Lord) which means God’s saints will not experience any judgment related to Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week of seven years (Dan. 9:24-27). The Church will be removed via translation to the place that God has prepared for His children (John 14:1-3).

Paul’s warning is very up to date for these times: “Let no man deceive you” (2 Thess. 2:3). Beloved, do not let anyone steal the blessed hope from your hearts that Jesus could return at any moment and rescue His children from the coming night of the Day of the Lord. Perhaps today! Jesus may come today (Rev. 22:20). Glad day!

Many embrace a mid-tribulation, pre-wrath, and post-tribulation view of the Rapture. But all who teach these errant positions are what I call “hope stealers.” Let no man deceive you! The biblical basis of the blessed hope is rooted in the imminent return of Christ in the Rapture and the rescue of the Church from God’s judgment that will overtake the earth for seven years. God’s promise is sure – “Not wrath but Rapture!”

Titus 2:13, “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.”



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