

## "Departure" (Greek "apostasia"): Rapture or Leaving The Faith?

2 Thessalonians 2:3

Compiled By Dr. Gary M. Gulan, ©1986, (rev. 07)

"Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless *the falling away* comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?" (2 Thess 2:1-5)

**Introduction:** This section of Scripture (2 Thess. 2:1-12) was written to correct an error in end-times thinking. False ideas or errors had infiltrated the Thessalonian's perspective of life causing them to be extremely alarmed. Some of the truths contained in this section are found nowhere else in the Bible. These truths are key to understanding a great part of future events. Within this context, Paul marked out a "departure" (Greek "apostasy") as an end times event. Was this departure, the arrival of Anti-Christ, a leaving of the faith, or the gathering of the church to the Lord?

One can almost believe there is a large group leaving the faith now with the changes to churches through such modern movements as the "seeker sensitive churches" and the "emerging church." Christians have not "strived against sin to the point of death" as the writer of Hebrews stated (Heb. 12:4), but have become as Paul has stated "lovers of pleasures more than the lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:4). There is no doubt that if the church continues to structure itself the way it is, "apostasy" is inevitable.

From deception and false teaching, many false religions and cults have "apostatized" from Christianity into something different than God intended. These groups have definitely become "apostate." We can learn that faithfulness to the Word of God directly relates to the purity and closeness to Christ and thus, the avoidance of "apostasy."

With regard to the end times, what does the "falling away" (Greek "apostasy") mean in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?

### **VIEWS OF "APOSTASIA" IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3**

Everything in the section (2 Thess. 2:1-12) is an expansion of two main events: (1.) the removal of the one now restraining; and (2.) the manifestation of Satan's man, the lawless one.

There are four main views as to what the "departure" (Greek "apostasy") means in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

**(1.) Same Single Event View:** The "rebellion" (i.e. "apostasy") and the "appearance" of Anti-Christ are the same. The Anti-Christ will set up his kingdom which is a direct rebellion to God's rule. Since the Anti-Christ will deceive many and unites many to go against God, the two events are linked together as equivalent. This view was held by Chrysostom, Augustine, James Moffatt, James Price, Luder Whitlock, Charles Wananmaker, and Robert Culver.

**(2.) Revolt View:** this refers to a large scale political or military "revolt" (i.e. "apostasy") against God. Usually viewed as taking place just prior to the Second Coming but could happen at the start of the tribulation. This revolt will be against God (either the creature against the Creator, or the Jew against God). This was held by H. A. A. Kennedy, A. L. Moore, I. Howard Marshall, Leon Morris, Robert Thomas, William Hendricksen, David Williams, John Stott, F. F. Bruce, and a few others.

**(3.) Rejection of the Faith View:** this refers to the latter-day religious "rejection" (i.e. "apostasy") or "defection" from the faith. It denotes a deliberate abandonment of a formerly professed position. It is a withdrawal from a former alliance with God. This view has several smaller more specific views on who it is that rejects their faith (the church prior to the Tribulation, or Israel prior to the Second Coming). This view was held by John Calvin, William Eerdman, W. E. Vine, J. B. Lightfoot, C. F. Hogg, D. Edmond Hiebert, Donald Bloesch, Marvin Rosenthal, Lewis Sperry Chafer, A. T. Robertson, Charles Ryrie, Robert Thomas, Timothy LaHaye, Louis Berkhof, along with many others. This view first showed up with the production of the King James Version in 1611.

**(4.) Rapture View:** This refers to the "departure" (i.e. "apostasy") or sudden removal spatially of the church to be with the Lord prior to the coming of the man of sin and the Tribulation. The reason the believers could be comforted or "not shaken" (2:2) is that they will have "departed" from the earth and be together with the Lord prior to the man of sin's evil work. The Tribulation can not start on earth and the lawless one can not be revealed on earth until the church "departs" from the earth. This view was held by J. S. Mabie, Allan MacRae, Stanley Ellisen, Gordon Lewis, E. Schuyler English, J. Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord, H. Wayne House, Kenneth Wuest, and Richard Reiter.

### **THE PROBLEM WITH "APOSTASIA" BEING TRANSLATED "FALLING AWAY" IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3**

I find several problems with (1.) translating the Greek word in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 with the English words "falling away" and (2.) making the "falling away" a "rejection of the faith" or "a falling away from the faith."

(1.) Based on rules of grammar there is one English word that "literally" translates any Greek word. Also based on rules of grammar the "context" reveals the meaning and application of that Greek word. The word "departure" best translates the Greek word "apostasia." To translate the Greek word "apostasia" into the English word "apostasy" is a transliteration, and not a true "literal" translation. To translate the Greek word "apostasia" into the English words "falling away" is interpolation of the Greek; a translation that reflects an interpretation.

(2.) The problem with the English word "apostasy" is that it has come to mean something a little different and a little deeper than that of the Greek word "apostasia." When translating the Greek word "apostasia" into English it is best to translate it "departure" and let the context reveal its meaning.

(3.) Case in point, the Greek word "apostasion" means "departure" and not a "falling away from the faith." Matthew and Mark use this word ("apostasion") to describe a "bill of divorce," (Matt.

5:31; Mk. 10:4). The word "apostasion" literally means a "departure" and the context makes it a "legal departure from the contract of a marriage." To give "apostasion" the meaning of "a falling away from the faith" would make all "divorces" spiritually unacceptable and sin, because the "divorce" would be the same as "falling away" from the Christian faith.

(4.) Many translators and commentators have made the Greek word "apostasia" ("departure," Acts 21:21; 2 Thess. 2:3) the same as the Greek word "aphistemi" ("departure" as found in Acts 12:10; 15:38; 19:9; 22:29; 2 Cor. 12:8; 1 Tim. 4:1; 6:5; 2 Tim. 2:19; Heb. 3:12). They have done this in order to make the "departure" of 2 Thess. 2:3 more closely connected "to a falling away from the faith." However, these Greek words are different and it is the "context" that reveals what the "departure" really is.

(5.) The English translation "falling away" giving the translation a more interpretive meaning of "leaving the faith," first showed up with the production of the King James Version Bible in 1611. Beza, a member of the Geneva Bible Translation Committee, changed the traditional translation of "departure" (Greek "apostasia") to the new alternative and interpretative words "falling away." The Wycliff Bible (1384), the Tyndale Bible (1526), the Coverdale Bible (1535), the Breches Bible (1576), the Beza Bible (1583) and the Geneva Bible (1608) all used the word "departure" for the translation of the Greek word "apostasia."

(6.) Beza's influence on the King James Version's new interpretative translation of "falling away" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 affected a majority of the translations that followed. Notice the translations that follow an interpretative translation of the word "apostasy:" NIV - "rebellion;" NRSV - "rebellion;" Goodspeed - "rebellion;" RSV - "rebellion;" Moffat - rebellion;" Phillips - "rejection;" Jerusalem Bible - "great revolt;" Williams "great revolt;" Berkeley - "apostasy;" ASV - "falling away;" and, NKJV - "falling away."

(7.) Beza's influence not only affected the translations, but also the Greek lexicons. The major Greek lexicons made "falling away" the major definition of the Greek word "apostasia" however, they still were careful to enter the word "departure" as another meaning. (a.) **Liddell and Scott.** This classical Greek lexicon which reveals normal usage of words *prior* to the age of the writing of the New Testament gives a meaning of "departure or disappearance" as a possible meaning of the word "apostasia." (a.) **Arndt and Gingrich.** This Greek Lexicon gives entries of usage *during* the New testament. They reveal the thought of "giving up a claim" for the word "apostasion" which in essence is a "departure." They also reveal the many related words point to the concept of a "departure." (c.) **Moulton and Milligan.** They provide several examples in "koine" Greek *during* the time of the New Testament of the verb "aphistemi" (a cognate of apostasia) as carrying the sense of spatial departure. (d.) **Lampe.** This Patristic Greek Lexicon which reveals the normal usage of words to the age *after* the writing of the New Testament gives a possible meaning of "departure" for the word "apostasia." (e.) **Kittel.** The word apostasia and its cognates can carry the spatial sense, to remove either spatially or from the context of a state or relationship.

(8.) I believe the doctrine of a massive latter-day retraction from the faith in conjunction with the revelation of the man of sin would be impossible if the rapture occurs prior to the tribulation.

There would not be that large of a group of false believers on earth in that short of a time frame to take part in a "falling away" from the faith.

(9.) I believe the doctrine of a massive event of a latter-day retraction from the faith prior to the rapture does not exist. There are no other verses that teach this. The evidence most teachers use for this great singular defection from the faith is really based on questionable ground and lacks genuine scriptural support.

(10.) Why would Paul use the word "apostasia" for the Rapture? Because the "departure" behind the Greek word "apostasia" is a "complete remove or departure," Paul used it to describe exactly what will happen to the church when it leaves the earth. The church will be completely removed.

(11.) The context lends itself to the "departure" ("apostasia") being the "rapture" and being connected to the same event as the "removal of the restrainer," so that the "man of sin" could be revealed.

### **CONTEXT OF "APOSTASIA" IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3**

(1.) Paul links the "Second Coming" (Greek "parousia" the "coming" 2:1) and "the Rapture" (Greek "episunagoge" the "gathering" 2:1) together because they start and end major programs in God's prophetic time table. The word "gathering" (the noun "episunagoge") is the same word for "with" (the verb "sunago") in 1 Thess. 4:17. There is only one definite article showing that these two events are complementary and have the same prophetic importance as future transitional events.

(2.) Paul makes a solemn appeal ("Now, brethren... we ask you") to the Thessalonians concerning their present agitated state. He appeals to them for calmness by understanding doctrinal truth. He was trying to correct their thinking so that they could enjoy calmness as easy as they had developed their distress ("not to be soon...").

(3.) The Thessalonians were "shaken" (Greek "saleuthenai" aorist infinitive, meaning "agitate, disturb, shake up" used of being tossed about by the rolling swell of the sea, thus a violent motion) in mind or "troubled" (Greek "throesthai" present imperative, meaning "frightened, troubled, to cry out loud" the idea of being unsettled and thrown into confusion). The Thessalonians were in a "continual state" (Greek aorist infinitive and present imperative) of shock, anxiety, and distress. A panic had taken place and the thought of imminent danger was upon them.

(4.) The Thessalonian confusion came from "three sources" (Greek disjunction "mete" meaning "neither" creating three clauses): (1.) "Not by spirit" They were told something by someone who imagined that he had the gift of prophecy and special knowledge; (2.) "Not by oral word" There was a report or rumor that someone had talked to Paul about something that happened; and (3.) "Not by written letter" There was a special letter reported to have been written from Paul. Paul denies these false things emphatically.

(5.) The Thessalonians were now confused because they were equating their present troubles with those of living in the "Day of the Lord." This caused them to think they missed the

"gathering" (i.e. "Rapture") and were now in the "Day of the Lord." The Thessalonians were encouraged earlier as they were under persecution with the reality of the "Second Coming," (2 Thess. 1:1-12). They were confused because they were expecting to have a peaceful and restful experience in the Lord, however, instead they were experiencing suffering and severe persecution, (1:7).

(6.) Paul exhorts the Thessalonians "not to let anyone deceive them." The Thessalonians were being "led astray" or "deceived" (Greek "exapatao") with false information. It happened so "quickly" (2:2 "soon") and it can happen through "several ways" (2:3, three of them).

(7.) Paul challenges the fact that the Thessalonians were already in "that Day" (the days leading up to the Second Coming) by pointing to certain events which are to precede the "second coming." He stated "that Day" (a conditional clause in the Greek), the day of apocalyptic judgment, will not arrive unless the "departure" (Greek "apostasy") comes first, and then "the man of sin" will be revealed, (2:3).

This "falling away" is a special event as seen by the use of two words: the word "the" (Greek definite article) is in front of the words "falling away" making this "falling away" a special event prior to the revealing of "the man of sin;" and the word "first" (Greek "proton") indicating that Anti-Christ's program leading up to the Second Coming cannot happen until this special event occurs.

(8.) The Thessalonians should have remembered this "special event" because Paul had already taught them about it, (2:5). No where in the Thessalonian epistles does Paul talk about a spiritual "defection" from the faith of the church or Israel, nor does Paul talk of a spiritual "rebellion" or "revolt" of the church or Israel. However, Paul does talk about a "departure" (i.e. a "catching up" the Rapture) of the church. In fact there has always been "a spiritual defection" or "apostasy" within Christianity, (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4:3-4; Ja. 5:1-8; 2 Pt. 2; 3:3-6; Jude). However, this special "event" Paul was speaking of is not equal to anything that has happened before.

(9.) The Thessalonians knew of the Day of the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:1-3) and the "catching up" (Greek "harpazo" translated "Rapture," 1 Thess. 4:13-18) of the church. Paul had already "told" (Greek "lego" imperfect tense, noting repeated action in past time) them of these end-times things, (2:5).

(10.) Paul told the Thessalonians about the "restraining" of the man of sin, (2:6-7). Someone right now is "restraining" or "holding back" (Greek "katecho") the man of sin. Until this Someone is "taken out of the way" which literally translated means, "taken out of the midst," (Greek "ek mesou"), the man of sin cannot start his work. The only Someone who can restrain "Satan" is God. The One who is now "in the midst" that will need to be "taken out of the midst" is the "Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit who is "in the midst" is personally "indwelling the saints." When the church is taken away from the earth to be with the Lord, the Holy Spirit who is "in the midst" will also be removed from this type of ministry. Since the removal of the restrainer takes place before the manifestation of the man of sin, we could connect the Rapture with this event.

**Conclusion:** Though Paul was not specifically discussing the timing of the Rapture, the Rapture is related to the discussion.

(1.) If the Thessalonians had been taught a "pretribulational Rapture" (and they were in 1 Thess. 4:13-18), then they were mentally distressed because they believed the rapture had occurred and they were left behind in the tribulation. Paul was correcting a false belief that they thought they had missed the "Rapture" (the "departure") and were now in the Day of the Lord.

(2.) If the Thessalonians had been taught a "posttribulational Rapture" (and they were not), then Paul would have told them that their persecution was normal and it will be getting worse living under the rule of Anti-Christ.

(3.) If the Rapture of the church is "imminent" and it is (2 Tim. 3:1; 1 Cor. 7:26 "enestechien"), then the Rapture must occur before the Anti-Christ is revealed. Paul was reminding the Thessalonians about this doctrine. If this were not true, the church would be looking for the "imminent" events of a large scaled "exodus" of church people leaving the faith and the revelation of the Anti-Christ, rather than a Rapture. The Anti-Christ is already at work and his appearance is based on the removal of the "restraining" ministry of the Holy Spirit at the Rapture, not a "falling away from the faith," and the "appearance of Anti-Christ."

(4.) "The grace of God prevents Christians from apostatizing. God does this, not by making it impossible for believers 'to fall away,' but by making it certain that they will not (Jn. 10; Heb. 6)." The "falling away" cannot refer to Christians defecting from the faith." (Erickson, 994)

(5.) There are words for "sin" that mean, "rebellion" (Hebrew "pasha" and "marah" and Greek "apeitheia" and "aphistemi"). Paul did not use these words describing future "rebellion" (1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12, "aphistemi"). Paul used a word to describe a "departure" ("apostasia").

(6.) "Paul was not setting a post-tribulational date for the rapture; he did not tell his readers that they would live to experience the 'apostasy....' Paul's point was merely that the 'apostasy' will precede the Day of the Lord. Since the 'apostasy' had not taken place the Day of the Lord could not have arrived." (MacArthur).

The correction and comfort for the Thessalonians to their prophetic mis-understanding that they were already in the Tribulation, was that the "rapture" will occur taking them away from earth's trials at the hand of Anti-Christ.

Though there are good scholars who hold that the "falling away" refers to a mass exodus or "apostasy" (negative context) of people who had previously indicated they had faith in the Lord, it would seem to me that the event of the "falling away" is really the "departure" (positive context) of the church in the Rapture. It seems to me this view better fits the context of first and second Thessalonians and end-times events.

**Books Consulted for this article:**

Are We Living In The End Times? Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, Wheaton: Tyndale, 1999, Pp. 67-78

When The Trumpet Sounds, Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, Eugene: Harvest House, 1995, Pp. 262-444

A Greek-English Lexicon, Henry George Liddell and Henry Scott, Oxford: Oxford University, 1940, p. 218

A Patristic Greek Lexicon, G. W. H. Lempe, Oxford: Clarendon, 1961, p. 208

A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature, William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, Pp. 68, 126-127

Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament, Gerhard Kittel, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969, p. 512

The Theological Wordbook, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, Nashville: Word, 2000, Pp. 18-19

The Vocabulary Of The Greek Testament, James Moulton and George Milligan, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930, p. 98

Kept From The Hour, Gerald Stanton, Miami Springs: Schoettle Pub., 1991, Pp. 292-293

Biography Of A Great Planet, Stanley Ellisen, Wheaton: Tyndale, 1975, Pp. 121-123

The Rapture Question, John Walvoord, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979, Pp. 239-245

The Blessed Hope And The Tribulation, John Walvoord, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976, p. 135

Re-thinking The Rapture, E. Schuyler English, Traverlors Rest: Southern Bible, 1954, p. 65

The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, Or Post-Tribulational?" Richard Reiter, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, Pp. 32, 61, 125; 188-189; 206; 228; 249

The Bible And Future Events, L. J. Wood, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973, Pp. 87-88

The Last And Future World, James Montgomery Boice, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, Pp. 42-43

"The Rapture - Precisely When?" Kenneth Wuest, Bibliotheca Sacra, Jan-Mar, 1957, Pp. 64-67

"Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism," Gordon Lewis, Bibliotheca Sacra, 1968, Pp. 217-218

"Apostasy," I. H. Marshall, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia Of The Bible, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Vol. 5, p. 216

"Apostasy," James Price and Luder Whitelock, Baker's Encyclopedia Of The Bible, Walter Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988, Vol. 1, Pp. 130-131

Understanding Christian Theology, Charles Swindol and Roy Zuck, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003, Pp. 374

Christian Theology, Millard Erickson, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, Pp. 573, 989-997

Systematic Theology, A. H. Strong, Valley Forge: Judson, 1976, Pp. 884-885

Systematic Theology, Robert Culver, Great Britian: Mentor, 2005, Pp. 771-772, 1123-1124, 113-1135

Systematic Theology, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948, Vol. VII, Pp. 17-19

Basic Theology, Charles Ryrie, Wheaton: Victor, 1986, Pp. 461-462

Dictionary Of New Testament Theology, Colin Brown, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979, Vol. 1, Pp. 606-608

Baker's Dictionary Of Theology, Everett Harrison, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960, p. 57

Ellicott's Commentary On The Whole Bible, Charles Ellicott, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, Vol. VIII, P. 154

Gill's Commentary, John Gill, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1854, Vol. VI, P. 574

Greek Text Commentaries, John Eadie, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977, Vol. 5, Pp. 253-268

1 & 2 Thessalonians, D. Edmond Hiebert, Chicago: Moody, 1971, Pp. 324-341

1 & 2 Thessalonians, John MacArthur, Chicago: Moody, 2002, The MacArthur New Testament

Commentary, Pp. 263-274

1 & 2 Thessalonians, F. F. Bruce, Waco: Word, 1982, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 45, Pp. 163-171

The First And Second Epistles To The Thessalonians, Leon Morris, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959,

The New International Commentary On The New Testament, Pp. 213-224

1 & 2 Thessalonians, Robert Thomas, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 11, Pp. 317-324

Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Charles Wanamaker, Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1990, Pp. 242-264

The Bible Knowledge Commentary, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Wheaton: Victor, 1983, Pp. 717-718

Unger's Bible Dictionary, Merrill Unger, Chicago: Moody, 1974, p. 72

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Herbert Lockyer, Nashville: Nelson, 1986, p. 78

Seven Signs Of The End Times, Mark Hitchcock, Sisters: Mulnomah, 2002, Pp. 81-93

The Second Coming, John MacArthur, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999, Pp. 53-56