

## THE “DEPARTURE” IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:3

*Tom’s Perspectives*  
by Thomas Ice

*Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy [departure] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,*

—2 Thessalonians 2:3

In March 2004 I wrote a *Pre-Trib Perspectives* about why I believe the Greek word *apostasia* was mistranslated in the *King James Version* as “a falling away” and the *New American Standard Bible* as “the apostasy.” Instead, the most accurate and therefore the best translation should be “the departure.” Greek scholar and theologian H. Wayne House says, “I have sought to demonstrate that the departure of the church may be the proper understanding found in the Greek word *apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.”<sup>2</sup> My colleague at the Pre-Trib Research Center, Tim LaHaye says, “I have come to the conclusion that the weight of evidence favors ‘departing’ as the proper translation of *apostasia* in the original text, not ‘apostasy’ or ‘falling away’ or ‘rebellion.’”<sup>3</sup> I will be revisiting this issue in this article. I now want to revisit this matter and provide further information that has strengthened my belief that this passage is teaching a pre-trib rapture.

### REVIEW

It was noted in my previous article that the best translation for the Greek word *apostasia* is “depart” or “departure.” Gordon Lewis summarizes the usage as follows:

The verb is used fifteen times in the New Testament. Of these fifteen, only three have anything to do with a departure from the faith (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb 3:12). The word is used for departing from iniquity (2 Tim. 2:19), from ungodly men (1 Tim. 6:5), from the temple (Luke 2:27), from the body (2 Cor. 12:8), and from persons (Acts 12:10; Luke 4:13).<sup>4</sup>

The mother of all Greek lexicons, Liddell and Scott, defines *apostasia* first as “defection, revolt;” then secondly as “departure, disappearance.”<sup>5</sup> Paul Lee Tan notes, “The definite article ‘the’ denotes that this will be a definite event, . . . 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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.

### TRANSLATION HISTORY

The first seven English translations of *apostasia* all rendered the noun as either “departure” or “departing.” They are as follows: Wycliffe Bible (1384); Tyndale Bible

(1526); Coverdale Bible (1535); Cranmer Bible (1539); Breeches Bible (1576); Beza Bible (1583); Geneva Bible (1608).<sup>7</sup> This supports the notion that the word truly means “departure.” In fact, Jerome’s Latin translation known as the Vulgate from around the time of A.D. 400 renders *apostasia* with the “word *discessio*, meaning ‘departure.’”<sup>8</sup> Why was the King James Version the first to depart from the established translation of “departure”?

Most scholars say that no one knows the reason for the translation shift. However, a plausible theory has been put forth by Martin Butalla in his Master of Theology thesis produced at Dallas Theology Seminary in 1998.<sup>9</sup> It appears that the Catholic translation into English from Jerome’s Latin Vulgate known as the Rheims Bible (1576) was the first to break the translation trend. “*Apostasia* was revised from ‘the departure’ to ‘the Protestant Revolt,’” explains Butalla. “Revolution is the terminology still in use today when Catholicism teaches the history of the Protestant Reformation. Under this guise, *apostasia* would refer to a departure of Protestants from the Catholic Church.”<sup>10</sup> The Catholic translators appear eager to engage in polemics against the Reformation by even allowing it to impact Bible translation. By 1611, when then 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. This would mean that the shift in translation was not based upon research of the meaning of the original language but as a theological polemic against the false teachings of Romanism.

It is well established that E. Schuyler English is thought to be the first pretribulationist to propose that “the departure” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 was a physical departure and thus a reference to the pre-trib rapture. However, history records that at least a couple of men thought of this idea before English’s series of article in 1950.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> He later wrote his view in an article published in November 1895 in a periodical called *Morning Star*.<sup>13</sup> Another pre-English proponent of “the departure” as the rapture was John R. Rice in a book in 1945.<sup>14</sup>

#### LITERARY STRUCTURE

In addition to the many reasons already cited for why *apostasia* should be translated as “the departure” and understood as a reference to the rapture of the Church before the day of the Lord, I should not forget to mention that the literary structure of the passage also supports the rapture view. It appears that Paul later in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–8 repeats the same two events mentioned in 2:3, thus supporting the rapture view for verse 3. Both events are stated twice in the passage: first, “the departure” (rapture) and “the revelation of the man of sin” (verse 3), and second, the restrainer (Holy Spirit) “is taken out of the way” (rapture) and “that lawless one will be revealed” (verses 7–8). If “the departure” is some form of apostasy then the parallelism is broken. Whatever Paul was saying in verse 3 is reiterated in verses 6–8. This literary construction is another factor that tips the scale in favor of seeing “departure” in verse 3 as the pre-trib rapture event.

The apparent reason why these two events are repeated twice is for the purpose of expounding in verses 7–8 upon the introductory statement in verse 3. Gordon Lewis notes:

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).<sup>15</sup>

We see the paralleling of “the departure” with the departure of the restrainer (Holy Spirit). Since most pretribulationists believe the departure of the restrainer is the Holy Spirit and is an argument for pretribulationism, it would make sense that they should be more open to “the departure” as a reference to the pre-trib rapture.

### CONCLUSION

Critics of pretribulationism contend that if the rapture before the tribulation is taught in the New Testament, then where is it clearly taught. I believe that other passages teach it as well, however, 2 Thessalonians 2 teaches that the rapture must occur before the day of the Lord (i.e., the tribulation). 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!

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Ice, “The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:3”, <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-TheRapturein2Thessal.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> H. Wayne House, “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?” in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, eds., *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today’s Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), p. 286.

<sup>3</sup> Tim LaHaye in Tim LaHaye, Thomas Ice, Ed Hindson, eds., *The Popular Handbook on the Rapture: Experts Speak Out on End-Times Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2011), p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon R. Lewis, “Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (vol. 125, no. 499; July 1968), p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> Henry George Liddell and Henry Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Revised with a Supplement [1968] by Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 218.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 341.

<sup>7</sup> House, “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3,” p. 270.

<sup>8</sup> House, “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3,” p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Martin William Butalla, “The Departure of the Restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2:3,” ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1998, pp. 58–60.

<sup>10</sup> Butalla, “Departure of the Restrainer,” pp. 59–60.

<sup>11</sup> E. Schuyler English, editor of *Our Hope*, a monthly publication that started a series in October 1949 and it ran through March 1951 teaching that “departure” referred to the rapture. English later published these installments in his book, *Rethinking the Rapture* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1954).

<sup>12</sup> Terry Arnold & Mike Claydon, “‘Apostasia’ (2 Thess. 2:3) – Apostasy or ‘Rapture’?” *Australia Diakrisis* (Vol. 2, No. 48; November/December 2007, p. 4.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard R. Reiter, "A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions," in Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Paul D. Feinberg, Douglas J. Moo, and Richard R. Reiter, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> John R. Rice, *The Coming Kingdom of Christ* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1945), p. 152.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, "Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism," p. 217.