

SECOND THESSALONIANS 2:3A-SPIRITUAL OR PHYSICAL DEPARTURE?

(PART 1)

by Andy Woods

The Background

Perhaps one of the most enigmatic Bible verses in all the Scripture is found in Second Thessalonians 2:3, which says, “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” (NKJV). The Apostle Paul had on his second missionary journey planted the church in Thessalonica. Within less than a year, Paul was forced out of Thessalonica by the unbelieving Jews that were persecuting him. Consequently, he was driven ultimately into Berea, then Athens, and finally Corinth. When Paul wrote the two Thessalonian epistles he was writing to the infant church that he had just planted about six months to a year earlier. Thus, his audience consisted primarily of new Christians, or what some might call today “baby Christians.”

These folks were confused, to say the least. Why were they confused? The immediately preceding verse (2 Thess. 2:2), says, “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.” Apparently, during Paul’s absence from Thessalonica a forged letter had begun to circulate in their midst, allegedly having come from Paul, telling the new Thessalonian believers that they were in the Tribulation period. When Paul was with them, about six months to a year later, he had taught them that they would be raptured to heaven prior to the Tribulation period (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18). Now, because of this forged letter that had come into their midst, the Thessalonian Christians thought that they were in the actual Tribulation period. This mindset was compounded by the fact that the unbelieving Jews that had persecuted Paul were now turning on Paul’s flock in his absence. Keep in mind that most of the New Testament had not even been written yet. Beyond that, the apostle that led them to Christ was now absent. Because they were new Christians, with very little spiritual knowledge, they were shaken and confused because of the apparent inconsistency between Paul’s initial teaching and his alleged letter to them.

Consequently, Paul responds in Second Thessalonians 2:3-12 by laying out five reasons why the Day of the Lord has not yet started. He explains that the Day of the Lord has not started yet because there is no apostasy (2:3a), advent of the lawless one or Antichrist (2:3a-4), removal of the restrainer (2:5-7), destruction of the lawless one (2:8-9), and destruction of the lawless one’s followers (2:10-12). What we are focused on here is the first item that Paul mentions as to why his audience was not yet in the Day of the Lord, or the Tribulation period. Paul is clear that first must come the “apostasy” or the “falling away” (2:3a). The English expression “apostasy” or “falling away” comes from the Greek noun *apostasia*. There are two major views on what is meant through the noun *apostasia*. The majority view is that it is speaking of a spiritual departure, such as the unbelieving world embracing the Antichrist. Most Christians today believe that this is what is meant and that is the sign that Paul gives here. However, there is an entirely different view on this topic. According to the second view, the *apostasia* is not a spiritual departure but rather represents a physical or spatial departure. If this latter view is accurate, Paul’s simple point to the Thessalonian

believers is that they could not possibly be in the Tribulation period because your physical departure, or the pretribulation rapture that I have already taught you about, has not yet transpired.

What difference does it really make if Second Thessalonians 2:3a is speaking of a spiritual departure or a physical departure? The reason it matters is because there has been for over at least the last century a vigorous debate amongst those who believe in a future Tribulation period and subsequent kingdom, concerning the question, “When the rapture will take place relative to the coming Tribulation period?” *Pretribulationists* believe that the rapture takes place before the Tribulation period begins. *Mid-tribulationists* believe that the rapture is going to take place in the middle of the Tribulation period. *Post-tribulationists* believe that the rapture will take place at the end of the Tribulation period. *Prewrath rapturists* contend that the rapture will take place at some point in the second half of the Tribulation period. If verse 3a, is talking about a physical departure and not a spiritual departure, then the debate concerning when the rapture will transpire is all but over. Paul says, “...that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first” (2 Thess. 2:3a). The word translated “first” is the Greek adjective *prōton*, which means “first of all.” If a physical departure must first transpire before the Day of the Lord can even begin, then it becomes a decisive victory for *pretribulationism*. Thus, how one interprets Second Thessalonians 2:3a is of grave consequence to the longstanding debate concerning the timing of the rapture.

I believe that what is being spoken of here is not a spiritual departure but rather a physical departure, which would be a great source of evidence favoring the pretribulation view. What I would like to present are ten reasons why I believe that the physical or spatial understanding of *apostasia* in Second Thessalonians 2:3a is the correct interpretation, and why the spiritual departure view is an inadequate interpretation.¹

There Have Always Been Doctrinal Departures

Spiritual departures are not abnormal. In fact, spiritual departures regularly transpire in Scripture going all the way back to the Fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3. Paul himself was the victim of wide-scale spiritual defection. Even though “all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10) through Paul’s prolific ministry in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, a short time later in his final letter written just prior to his death Paul reported that “all who are in Asia turned away from me” (2 Tim. 1:15). The Apostle Paul in his day also predicted a spiritual departure after the passing away of the apostolic generation. In Acts 20:28-31, he warned:

[28] Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. [29] I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Here, Paul predicted that after the apostolic generation left the scene there would be a wide scale spiritual departure in the church. As one studies the last two thousand years of church

history we can see how Paul's prophecy came to pass. There are perpetual spiritual departures.

For example, note the rules of Harvard University, which was founded in 1636:

Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider that the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life, John 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning. And seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, let everyone seriously set himself to prayer in secret to seek it of Him, Proverbs 2 and 3. Everyone shall so exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day, that he shall be ready to give such an account of his proficiency therein.²

I would say that Harvard University has spiritually departed from its founding standard, wouldn't you? My point here is that if spiritual departures are normative throughout history, how could yet another a spiritual departure function as a definitive sign of the beginning of the Tribulation period? Thus, Paul must be using the noun *apostasia* to communicate something more than a mere spiritual departure in Second Thessalonians 2:3a.

Second Thessalonians Was an Early Letter

Both 1–2 Thessalonians were among the earliest letters that Paul wrote. Here is a brief chronology of Paul's letters. The first letter he wrote was the Book of Galatians, about A.D. 49. The next two letters he wrote around the same period and in very close proximity to one another are 1–2 Thessalonians around A.D. 51. Then later came the two Corinthian letters and Romans (A.D. 56–57). These letters were then followed by his "prison letters" (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians) written from A.D. 60–62. Finally, late in his ministry, Paul wrote letters to pastors, such as First Timothy and Titus (A.D. 62) and 2 Timothy (A.D. 67). Thus, 1–2 Thessalonians were probably written during the same year, with perhaps six months to a year at most between these two letters. Moreover, there is a very small amount of time between Paul's planting of the church in Thessalonica, which occurred during his second missionary journey, and when he wrote 1–2 Thessalonians.

Why is this chronology relevant? Although Paul does deal with an immediate apostasy among his flock early on (Gal. 1:6-9), he does not start predicting and warning about a spiritual end time apostasy until much later in his ministry. End-time apostasy is not a topic on his mind early on. In fact, to my knowledge, the very first prediction that Paul gives concerning a coming spiritual departure is from the verses noted earlier at the end of his third missionary journey when he was speaking to the elders at Ephesus at Miletus (Acts 20:28-31). It is then in the Timothy letters, that Paul really starts predicting an end-time spiritual departure. While Paul does it some in First Timothy (1 Tim. 4:1ff), it becomes a massive subject in Second Timothy (2 Tim. 3:14–4:8). Although the Apostle Peter picks up this same theme in Second Peter, keep in mind that this book was also not written until very late, around A.D. 64. Then, the Lord's half-brother Jude writes a one chapter book, focusing intensely on the theme of an end-time spiritual apostasy in the book of Jude (A.D. 68–70).

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 becomes a big topic later, it is not a dominant subject when the church first started. As already noted 1–2

Thessalonians were written very early on in Paul's ministry. Thus, it would be somewhat of an oddity for Paul to focus upon the subject of an end time spiritual departure in the very early Thessalonian epistles when this subject is not something that Paul emphasizes until much later in his life and ministry. In fact, as you study the Thessalonian books, outside of this single disputed verse (2 Thess. 2:3a), we do not find Paul using the word "apostasy" or even the concept.

In the this installment we noted the first two of ten reasons why *apostasia* of Second Thessalonians 2:3a should be understood as a physical departure rather than a spiritual departure. Since doctrinal departures would have been considered normative throughout the Church Age, how could that, in and of itself, be a definitive sign of the end? Also, the Thessalonian letters are very early letters, where Paul does not get into the subject of an end-time doctrinal or spiritual departure.

(To Be Continued...)

¹ This series was originally published as a single article in *The Prophecy Watcher* Magazine. See Andy Woods, "2 Thessalonians 2:3a: Apostasy of Rapture?," *The Prophecy Watcher*, May 2017, pp. 14-17, 34-35.

² Cited in David Barton, *Original Intent: The Courts, the Constitution, & Religion*, 3d ed. (Aledo, TX: Wall Builder Press, 2000), p. 81.