

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

(PART 2)

by Andy Woods

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 immediately preceding verse (2 Thess. 2:2) indicates that 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.

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?" 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 In the prior installment we noted that 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. In this installment, we will note two additional reasons

why *apostasia* in Second Thessalonians 2:3a should be understood as a physical departure rather than a spiritual departure.

The Definite Article Before the Noun *Apostasia*

There is a definite article in front of the noun “apostasy.” Second Thessalonians 2:3 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). Notice the definite article translated “the” in front of both “falling away” and “man of sin.” By providing these two definite articles essentially Paul is indicating that the apostasy will be something that has specific, time bound-qualities just like the man of sin’s coming has such qualities. In other words, just like the advent of the man of sin will be specific and an instantaneous event in future history, the coming *apostasia*, or departure, will similarly be specific and time bound.

The advent of the coming lawless one or Antichrist will take place at a specified point in time and instantaneously and concurrently with the opening of the first seal judgment (Rev. 6:1-2). The definite article also before the *apostasia* indicates that in the same way the *apostasia* will also take place instantaneously. Such an instantaneous manifestation does not fit well with the notion of a spiritual departure, which typically transpires gradually over an elongated process. Spiritual departures are not instantaneous events. After all, it took the church at Ephesus three decades to spiritually depart from Christ by leaving its first love (Rev. 2:4-5). However, unlike gradual, spiritual departures, the rapture of the church will be an instantaneous event that will take place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:51). Thus, the use of the two definite articles indicates that the *apostasia* will take place just as instantly as the coming forth of the lawless one. This understanding better harmonizes with interpreting “the *apostasia*” as the instantaneous removal of the church through the rapture rather than a gradual doctrinal erosion.

The Noun *Apostasia* Can Refer to a Physical Departure

The noun, *apostasia*, can refer to a physical departure. Those arguing for a doctrinal departure interpretation of Second Thessalonians 2:3a typically contend that the only other time that noun *apostasia* is used in the entire Greek New Testament is in Acts 21:21. This verse says “and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake the law Moses.” The noun translated “forsake” here is also the Greek noun *apostasia*. In other words, Paul was accused in Acts 21:21, in a totally different context, of leading a spiritual apostasy or departure away from the Law of Moses. Spiritual departure advocates of Second Thessalonians 2:3a contend that since the noun *apostasia* clearly means a spiritual departure in Acts 21:21, which is the only other time the noun is ever used in the Greek New Testament, then that is what the noun also must mean in Second Thessalonians 2:3a.

However, such methodology represents a shallow way of determining a word’s meaning. Words mean things based upon their own unique context. When you travel to a removed, remote context in an entirely different book of the Bible that is the product of an entirely different human author to establish the meaning of a word, you are employing an inadequate method of interpretation since that remote context (Acts 21:21) most likely gives the same word *apostasia* an entirely different meaning than the one found in Second Thessalonians 2:3a. Although the Greek noun *apostasia* can refer to a doctrinal departure in Acts 21:21, this noun is not a technical word meaning a word that always means the same thing everywhere it is used.

The Greek noun *apostasia* is a compound word, which means that it is a word that is created by combining two previously existing words. The first word is the Greek preposition *apo*, which means “away from.” The second word is the Greek verb *histēmi*, which means, “to stand.” Thus, *apostasia* simply means to “to stand away from” or “to depart.” The question then becomes depart from what? Only by examining how this word is used in its immediate context will determine what the departure is from, whether it be a

spiritual or physical departure. Thus, *apostasia* does not inherently mean doctrinal departure, although it can mean that if the context calls for it. Furthermore, *apostasia* does not inherently mean physical departure, although (as I argue later) it can also mean that if the context demands it. Context then becomes the critical factor in determining what the *apostasia* or departure is from.

In actuality, the Greek noun *apostasia*, can in some contexts refer to a physical departure. We know this to be the case since Liddell and Scott, a well-known Greek lexicon, uses the following terms to define *apostasia*: “rebellion against God, apostasy, departure, disappearance, distance.”² While the first two definitions favor a spiritual departure understanding, the latter three entries favor a physical or spatial departure view. Similarly, Lampe’s *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* defines *apostasia* as “revolt, defection, apostasy (from paganism, Judaism, Christianity, orthodoxy), divorce, departure, standing aloof.”³ While the first three definitions favor a spiritual departure understanding, the latter three entries favor a physical or spatial departure view. H. Wayne House notes the chronological significance of these two lexical sources and why they have a bearing on the meaning of the word *apostasia* during the New Testament period.

The noun form allows for *apostasia* as a simple departure in the classical period, proved by examples from Liddell and Scott...If one says that this is not important because the meaning is only classical or ancient and thus lost its meaning by the time of the New Testament, then I may turn to the same root meaning of *apostasia* in the patristic era immediately following the New Testament period, as indicated in the definitions for the noun form in Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Although the noun used in the sense of spatial departure is not the normal meaning...during New Testament times, the word is found with this meaning in time periods before and after the New Testament era, and it is likely to have been understood this way at least sometimes.⁴

Therefore, quite clearly, the noun, *apostasia*, can, in some contexts, refer to a physical or spatial removal, and therefore, as previously noted, cannot be a technical word.

In the this and the prior installment we noted the first four 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. 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. In addition, the noun *apostasia* can very clearly refer to a physical 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, 14-17, 34-35.

² Henry Liddell & Henry Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 218.

³ G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 208.

⁴ H. Wayne House, "Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy of Rapture?," in *When the Trumpet Sounds: Today's Foremost Authorities Speak out on End-Time Controversies*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 273.