

The Apostasy First

📖 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8

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In our studies on Major Prophetic Passages we have been studying prophecies related to the Church. The Church, we said, was a mystery, meaning it was unrevealed in the OT, but now revealed in the NT. So, the Church is not Israel or a new spiritual Israel but something distinct. The first prediction of it was Matt 16:18 when Jesus said, "I will build My Church." Once the Church was announced new truths regarding the Church also began to be announced. One of the new prophetic truths revealed concerning the Church was that it would go to apostasy. That is, the Church would start with the Scriptures as truth and move away from the Scripture and turn to myths. Church History attests to this downward trend. Yes, there have been clarifications of the truth, and yes, there have been orthodox groups spring up here and there, but in the main the trend has been downward. We charted the apostasy this way, and we asked, "Will there come a time when there is no truth left on the earth, a total apostasy if you will." The second major prophecy concerning the Church is the rapture. When you combine the three major rapture passages they teach that Jesus would go to the Father's house, He would return in the air at some unknown time and receive believers to Himself who would then return with Him to heaven. Those who died before He returns are already with Him until the day He returns when they will be raised first to descend with Him and meet those who are alive and remain; who will be caught up, transformed into resurrection bodies in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. From that moment on the Church shall be with Him forevermore. When we put these two prophetic truths of the rapture and the apostasy together, we wonder if the rapture and the apostasy might coincide at a point in time. Because complete apostasy would mean there is no faith left on the earth and the rapture would result in no believers left on the earth. So, do the timing of the rapture and the apostasy coincide with one another? Thinking about that possibility will be part of our lesson today.

Before we turn to that part we want to look at the timing of the rapture relative to the Tribulation. We have commented on the pre-, mid- and post-trib as relevant in the three major rapture positions. The links that a mid- or post-trib position must make are highly questionable. What they are doing is linking the trump of God in 1 Thess 4:13-18 and the last trumpet in 1 Cor 15:52 in with either the seventh trumpet in Rev 11:15, giving the mid-trib position, or the great trumpet in Matt 24:31, giving the post-trib position. The trouble with linking either of

these to 1 Thess 4:13-18 or 1 Cor 15:52 is that neither of them mentions a resurrection, and both of them fall in very different contexts. Neither 1 Thess 4:13-18 or 1 Cor 15:52 mention tribulation judgments. Both Matt 24:31 and Rev 11:15 mention tribulation judgments. From these facts it does not seem very likely that the passages link up. Walvoord explained why they don't link up. He said it is permissible for a rapture passage to not include events of the tribulation if the rapture occurs before the tribulation. But it is not permissible if one must survive part or all of the tribulation in order to make it to the rapture. Put another way, how could the rapture be a comfort today if we knew that we had to enter into the tribulation before the rapture could come?

The truth is there is no indication that we will enter into the tribulation. The tribulation seems to relate to Israel and the nations, not the Church. Turn to Dan 9:24. This is where Daniel had been studying the scroll of Jeremiah and noted that they would be in captivity to Babylon for seventy years. He assumed that his nation would be restored to the kingdom after the seventy years. It was near the end of the seventy years. He was praying, confessing his sin and the sin of his people, Israel, because a pre-requisite to the kingdom being restored is a repentant Israel. Daniel didn't understand the prophecies of Jeremiah fully, so the Lord dispatched the angel Gabriel to give Daniel understanding. In 9:24 Gabriel said, "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city..." The seventy weeks are decreed for who? Daniel's people and Daniel's holy city. Who are Daniel's people? The nation Israel. What is Daniel's holy city? Jerusalem. So, the seventy weeks, or 490 years, relate to the nation Israel and Jerusalem, not to the Church. The Church was never in existence on earth during the first 483 years and it stands to reason that it will not be in existence on earth during the last seven years. As for the last seven years, they begin in 9:27 when "he" (the anti-Christ) will make a firm covenant with the many for one week." Therefore, it stands to reason that the Church will have already been raptured prior to the beginning of the last seven years. So, Dan 9:24-27 indicate that the last seven years, what we often refer to as the Tribulation, is for the nation Israel and Jerusalem and therefore has no purpose for the Church and so the Church will have already been raptured before the Tribulation.

Another line of evidence is from the expression the day of the Lord. The OT used this expression or its shortened forms such as "that day" over 80 times. The day of the Lord begins with God's wrath on the earth. For example, Zeph 1:14ff, "Listen, the day of the Lord! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. ¹⁵A day of wrath is that day, A day of trouble and distress, A day of destruction and desolation, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness, ¹⁶A day of trumpet and battle cry Against the fortified cities And the high corner towers. ¹⁷I will bring distress on men So that they will walk like the blind, Because they have sinned against the Lord; And their blood will be poured out like dust And their flesh like dung. ¹⁸Neither their silver nor their gold Will be able to deliver them On the day of the Lord's wrath; And all the earth will be devoured In the fire of His jealousy, For He will make a complete end, Indeed a terrifying one, Of all the inhabitants of the earth." Other passages describe the day of the Lord as ending with God's blessing on the earth. For example, Joel 3:18, "And in that day (the day of the Lord) The mountains will drip with sweet wine, And the hills will flow with milk, And all the brooks of Judah will flow with water; And a spring will go out from the house of the Lord To water the valley of Shittim." It seems

that the day of the Lord is divided into two phases; phase one is a time of God's wrath and corresponds to the last seven years of Daniel's prophecy, or the Tribulation, and phase two is a time of God's blessing and corresponds to the one-thousand-year kingdom. It seems the Church will not see the time of wrath.

The NT states explicitly that the Church is not destined for wrath. First, turn to Rom 5:8. In Romans 5:8 Paul states, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God has done the greater thing of demonstrating His love toward us by sending Christ to die for us while we were yet sinners, and enemies of His, then will not God do the lesser thing of saving us from the wrath now that we have been justified by His blood? Since the wrath is the judgment during the coming day of the Lord, or Tribulation, that last seven years, then we will not be present on earth during those seven years. Second, turn to 1 Thess 1:9-10. Paul is commending the Church at Thessalonica because of their tremendous testimony going out to all Asia. The report from Asia is verse 9, "For they themselves report about us what kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God..." That was a huge testimony in the 1st century when worshipping idols was so prevalent. But that's not the whole report they received about the Church at Thessalonica. Verse 10 adds, "and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." There are two key ideas here. First, the description of what the Thessalonians were doing in v 10. They were "waiting for His Son from heaven." The word "waiting" is *anameno*. The etymology of this word is from the preposition *ana* meaning "up" and the verb *meno* meaning "wait." It might sound like it means "wait up," as if staying awake for Him to come from heaven for them. That's not a bad idea but the preposition *ana* is intensifying the waiting and what it means is "expectantly waiting." They were waiting for Him because they were expecting Him to come for them from heaven. His coming for them was the next thing they expected. What doctrine is that? Imminency. They were expecting Christ to come at any-moment. They were not expecting anti-Christ. Why not? Because the anti-Christ comes after Christ. The anti-Christ is associated with the wrath of the day of the Lord and the last seven years of Daniel. Christ comes for them before all that and so they were looking for Him. The second key idea is the end of verse 10. "Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." So just like Romans 5:9 "we shall be saved from the wrath to come" so here "Jesus will rescue us from the wrath to come." Since the wrath comes with the day of the Lord then it only makes sense that Jesus will come rescue us before the Tribulation. That would mean the rapture is before the Tribulation.

Now some want to say that the wrath of the day of the Lord does not come until the mid-point or the very day of the Second Coming, so what they do is say that the first part of the Tribulation is not God's wrath, it's man's wrath, and they argue that the Church can be in man's wrath but not God's wrath, and so this is how they get us going through part of the Tribulation. They are saying some of the wrath is man's wrath because they look at the seal judgments and they see the four horsemen; war, famine, disease, and they say this is all originating with man. I have analyzed this kind of argument and found it unconvincing. The major reason is that that the seal

judgments are all initiated by the Lamb of God. He is the only one who was able to take the scroll out of the Father's right hand and break the seals. As He breaks each seal these four horsemen and other seal judgments come upon the earth. So, it's not convincing to say that it is not His wrath until the sixth seal or later. It is His wrath from the very start, for if He did not break the seals, the wrath within them could never be unleashed upon the earth. The fact that men and Satan are involved does not change the fact that it is His wrath. The OT prepared us for this by showing that when God unleashes wrath He uses instruments like man, nature and demons to carry it out (e.g.; Joel 1:1-15). So this should be no surprise. And Rom 5:9 is saying "we shall be saved from the wrath to come" and 1 Thess 1:10 is saying "Jesus will rescue us from the wrath to come." So then, the whole tribulation is God's wrath and the Church will be exempt from the whole of it, not just a part of it.

Another issue we might discuss at this point is the problem of putting the rapture anywhere in the Tribulation or after it at the Second Coming. If we do that, when is the judgment seat of Christ going to take place? There has to be some time for the Church to be judged for rewards. If the rapture is during the Tribulation, then when is Jesus going to judge us? During the Tribulation, He will be orchestrating the Tribulation judgments. If the rapture occurs at the Second Coming, when will He have time to judge us? He's busy there dividing believers from unbelievers and establishing kingdom conditions on the earth. So, there is really no time for a judgment seat of Christ and return to the Father's house if these things happen either during the Tribulation or at the Second Coming. Besides, if it's at the Second Coming how is it that we are seen coming back with Him in Rev 19 on the day of the Second Coming. When did we go to the Father's house? So, all of this adds up to saying that the rapture cannot be anytime within the Tribulation or at the Second Coming. It must be before the Tribulation.

Now turn to 1 Thess 5 for more evidence. Paul has just taught the rapture in 1 Thess 4:13-18 to comfort those who had lost loved believers before the rapture. In 5:1 he changes subjects slightly by the use of *peri de*, so that what is here is connected to what has come before but a slightly different topic, namely verse 2, the day of the Lord, which verse 9 refers to as a day of wrath. Even the grammar seems to indicate that the rapture in chapter 4 occurs first before the day of the Lord in chapter 5. Just as well, the sequence seems to argue for the rapture first, in chapter 4, preceding the day of the Lord's wrath, in chapter 5. But we want to look at chapter 5. In 5:1 Paul says, "Now as to the times and the epochs..." This phrase was lifted by Paul from Daniel 2. It refers to kingdom changes. Paul is talking about the change from the Gentile kingdoms seen by Daniel in the statue to the kingdom of God. And he says concerning this kingdom change, "brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you." Why? Because Paul taught them all of this, same as I taught you. Verse 2, "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night." They knew the day of the Lord's wrath would come suddenly and unexpectedly, like a thief. Now verse 3, and note the shift in pronouns. Before it was "you" the Thessalonians, now it is "they," the world. "While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape." In other words, the day of the Lord actually begins with a period of peace and then the destruction will come suddenly and the world will not escape. Corresponding to this, what is the first seal in Rev 6? The rider on the

white horse proclaiming peace. So the day of the Lord begins with a short period of peace and then suddenly destruction will come and the world will not escape. We will escape. We will be raptured before that. Verse 4, what Paul is doing is exhorting them to live differently than the world. "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; ⁵for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; ⁶so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. ⁷For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we are of *the* day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. ⁹For God" and watch this, "God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him." We're not destined for the wrath of the day of the Lord. What we are destined for is salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are going to live with Him in heaven. The salvation here is a future salvation that we have in store for us and it is the rapture, being rescued away from the day of the Lord wrath. And this is nothing new, they already knew this. Paul already said this in 1:10 where he said, "Jesus will rescue us from the wrath to come." So, salvation here is a reference to the rapture deliverance. He uses salvation in the same way in 2 Thess 2:13-14 where he says, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. ¹⁴It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Because the salvation in verse 13 corresponds to gaining the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ at resurrection in verse 14. Paul commonly uses salvation for rapture in the Thessalonian epistles. The Thessalonians knew all this well. They had a great eschatology. Paul taught them that they were to live in constant expectation of Jesus coming from heaven to rescue them from the wrath to come at the rapture, and that they would together live with Him in heaven.

But turn to 2 Thess 2. Something happened between 1 Thess and 2 Thess. 2 Thess 2:2 is telling us that something had shaken them up, something had disturbed them, some false doctrine that came to them by way of a spirit or a message or a letter as if it had come from Paul. In other words, it was some forgery, and what was the message? That "the day of the Lord had already come," perfect tense. It was already there and they were in the day of the Lord. That had disturbed their eschatology because what Paul taught was that they would be rescued from the day of the Lord. But how could they have thought they were in it? The day of the Lord is judgment. Except remember, the very initial part of it is peace. 1 Thess 5:2, when they are saying "Peace and safety," and the first seal in Rev 6 is "peace." So, they got a message somehow that they were in the very early stages of the day of the Lord. That's the problem that Paul has to correct. And, FYI, this is the most controversial of all the passages discussed around the rapture. Nobody seems to be able to agree and so that means there is either something huge at stake or the passage is very difficult. In verse 1 Paul says, "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering to Him, that you not be quickly shaken..." The request is simple, do not be quickly shaken up. The issue is "with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering to Him." This seems to be a reference to the rapture. Why? Because we are being gathered to Him.

There is no Second Coming passage where we are gathered to Him. So, this seems like the coming of the Lord Jesus in the air and our being caught up or gathered to Him to go back with Him to the Father's house. People debate all this, but I think you see how easily this is a reference to the rapture. So, the topic is the rapture, and verse 2 brings in the idea of the day of the Lord. They were stirred up by a message or letter "to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." The perfect tense means it had already come and they were therefore in the initial portion of the day of the Lord. In verse 3 Paul is correcting that by explaining an order of events that must happen before the day of the Lord can come. He says, "Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction." The sequence is two things must happen before the day of the Lord can come. First, the apostasy. What is the apostasy? Well, that is a huge debate. Personally, I don't think it matters too much for the timing of the rapture because I think the nature of the problem as described in vv 1-2 has already settled that our gathering to Him must occur before the day of the Lord begins. But Paul gives the first event that must happen before the day of the Lord as the apostasy. The Greek word is *apostasía*. It is a cognate of the verb *aphistemi* which as a transitive verb means "to cause to revolt, to mislead," and as an intransitive verb means "to go away, withdraw, depart, fall away." Our word is the noun, it means "rebellion, abandonment, state of apostasy" or "defection." The word is used only twice in the NT; here and in Acts 21:21 where it says that Paul was teaching the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses..." In that context, the word means to "abandon" the Law of Moses. The issue people are arguing about in our verse is whether the noun can take on the meaning of the intransitive verb "depart," in the sense of a physical departure. In other words, some pre-trib rapture folks want "the apostasy" to be the rapture itself. Several hold this view such as Thomas Ice and Wayne House. The great Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest also held this view. This view would be saying that the rapture has to happen before the day of the Lord can begin. If that is correct then this verse proves the pre-trib rapture. I have held this view but I don't think it is the strongest view. Another view is that it means "rebellion." This is more in keeping with the meaning of the noun. This view says that the world must be in entire rebellion against God. Renald Showers holds this view. His point is that after the rapture the whole world will be plunged into rebellion against God. Since this had not happened they could not possibly be in the day of the Lord. A third view is that it means "rebellion" of the Jews against God. This view places the rebellion within the Tribulation. I think this is one of the weaker views in this context. There are other weaker views as well I won't discuss. A fourth view that is sound is that the word means "a state of apostasy." I think this is the best view. It is in keeping with the normal meaning of the noun. It also takes note of the fact that the noun is prefaced by the definite article which may emphasize a "state." Apostasy has been taking place through the Church age but this would be the apostasy, the state of the world at the end of the process of apostasy. What this means is that the result of the rapture is the state of apostasy since there will be no faith on the earth. In this way, the rapture and the apostasy coincide. The rapture is the cause, the apostasy is the result. It is not difficult to imagine that when the Church is raptured the earth is vacant of any faith and that is *the* apostasy. Paul's point would be that this apostasy has to happen before the day of the Lord comes. Since it had not happened the Thessalonians could not possibly be in the day of the Lord. Therefore, they should not be

quickly shaken. The second event that must happen in sequence before the day of the Lord can come is “the man of lawlessness” must be “revealed.” The man of lawlessness is the anti-Christ. Portions of his career are explained in vv 4ff that come from the Book of Daniel; his opposition to God, his exaltation of himself in the temple of God and display of himself as God. They knew all these things. They also knew new truths about the anti-Christ described in v 6, that there is presently a restraint that is being imposed by a person that when removed will result in verse 8 in the revealing of the anti-Christ. The end of anti-Christ’s career is described in verse 8 as occurring at Christ’s coming and this is His Second Coming to earth. Verse 9 describes what energizes the anti-Christ, namely Satan, and the signs and wonders that will accompany him and how those who do not believe the gospel in that time will be blinded by God so that they follow him and go to destruction. But verse 13 is saying Paul gave thanks that we were chosen from the beginning for salvation at the rapture, being rescued out of this world so that at that time in verse 14 we gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a comforting passage because it shows that our gathering together to Him will occur before the day of the Lord, and further, the apostasy or absence of faith on the earth must also occur before the day of the Lord, then the revealing of the anti-Christ must take place. Then and only then can the day of the Lord begin. Therefore, the Thessalonians could not possibly be in the initial period of the day of the Lord. They need not be disturbed by the letter or message to the effect that they were in the initial stages of the day of the Lord.

In conclusion, what have we seen? First, that the Church is not going to enter into the last seven years of Daniel’s 490-year calendar. The 490 years are for Israel and Jerusalem, not the Church. The Church was not in the first 483 years and it doesn’t appear in the last seven years either. When we study the Book of Revelation we will see that the Church is not mentioned once as being on earth during the Tribulation. It may be an argument from silence, but the silence is deafening. Second, that the OT predicted a time known as the day of the Lord which is initially an outpouring of God’s wrath. In the NT, we are told that the day of the Lord’s wrath will have an initial period of peace, but that we are not destined at all for this, but to be saved from it and be gathered to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Before the day of the Lord can come the complete apostasy must take place first, then the revealing of the anti-Christ. We will be long gone. Therefore, the pre-Trib rapture is the most consistent timing of the rapture to get all these passages together. Like the Thessalonians we should be waiting expectantly for Christ, not looking for or trying to identify the anti-Christ, whose identity is being restrained until sometime after the rapture. Therefore, keep looking for Christ and living every moment as if it were your last moment.