

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 56

RAPTURE PASSAGES, PART 6

2 Thessalonians 2:3, the apostasy

We've already discussed the fact that Paul laid out a timeline in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 by revealing the Rapture is first (1 Thess. 4:13-18) and only then can the Day of the Lord begin (1 Thess. 5:1-11). In 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4, he also reveals a time marker. The context is set in verse 1 regarding the gathering together of believers with their Lord.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 ¹Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, ²that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy [ἀποστασία, departure] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

Our English word apostasy is simply a transliteration of the Greek, ἀποστασία, and as such carries no meaning in and of itself. In other words, we have to give it meaning. In English, the definition of apostasy is “the abandonment or renunciation of a religious or political belief” [*The Oxford American College Dictionary*]; therefore, when we read the word “apostasy” in the Bible, we automatically read this meaning into it. That is a good meaning based on the Greek but it is not a technical or all-encompassing definition. To some extent but probably not completely, that is a mistake many people make when reading 1 Thessalonians 2:3.

Apostasy, ἀποστασία, according to most lexicons means rebellion or abandonment; to rise up in open defiance of authority with the presumed intention to overthrow it or to act in complete opposition to its demands. It is defiance of established system or authority, rebellion, abandonment, [or] breach of faith. [BDAG]. There is another meaning for this word which is not mentioned very often but that is the element of departure from something or someone although rebellion or abandonment come very close to that meaning. Certainly, that's the basis for understanding apostasy as we think of it—an abandonment of or a departure from the faith once held. In my mind at least, it is important to keep in mind when interpreting 2 Thessalonians 2:3 that unbelievers cannot, by definition, be apostate; they can't leave a faith they never embraced in the first place so the meaning is not that all-encompassing in terms of describing all people. The meaning can apply to secular circumstances and it isn't just about the Christian faith. For example, in Acts 21:21, Paul is being criticized for teaching the Jews living among

the Gentiles to forsake or abandon [ἀποστασία] Moses. In other words, Paul was accused of leading some Jews into departing from Moses. The idea of departure is part of this word and most modern theologians tend to ignore it. Why? Because it lends support to the Rapture position and they don't want to admit that. [For a discussion of this issue, see John Sweigart, "Is There a Departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3" in *The Conservative Theological Journal* 5, no. 15 (August 2001), 186-204].

Early English translations of the Bible recognized the element of departure and translated ἀποστασία as "departing." An opponent of this view of the Rapture as spatial departure criticized H. Wayne House for using this point to support the concept of spatial departure.

"Proponents of the Rapture view have generally followed English in his appeal to early English Bibles, noting that they translated ἀποστασία in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 as 'departing.' English says: 'William Tyndale's version of the N.T., translated and published at Worms, c. 1526, renders *hee [sic] apostasia*, 'a departynge.' Coverdale (A.D. 1535), Cranmer (1539), and the Geneva Bible (1537) render it the same way. Beza (1565) translates *apostasia* departing.' The implication of these appeals to the translation 'departing' in earlier versions is that they give support or credence to the Rapture view since they can be understood to be referring to a spatial departure. House adds to the list of early translators, suggesting that the Wycliffe Bible of 1384 has the rendering "departynge" and that Jerome, in his Vulgate, used the 'Latin word *discessio*, meaning 'departure.' In fact, House goes so far as to say that Jerome used *discessio* because he specifically understood ἀποστασία to mean a spatial departure." [William W. Combs, "Is Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 3, no. 3 (1998): 75-76].

2 Thessalonians 2:3 ³Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a departing first, and that that man of sin be disclosed, even ysonne of perdition, (Geneva Bible).

Some translators refer to ἀποστασία as a rebellion (ESV, NET) or even a great rebellion (NLT). The problem with this thinking is it puts the rebellion, which I would think refers to the Tribulation, at the same time the man of lawlessness is revealed, but the rebellion doesn't begin until after he is revealed. Actually, the time marker for the Tribulation begins with the signing of the covenant with Israel, but it can't start until that happens which is after the departure. He will appear as a man of peace and the world will be fooled into thinking he is a man of peace while he is laying the ground work for the rebellion (1 Thess. 5:3). The idea Paul is conveying by using the word ἀποστασία must be something other than a rebellion.

Paul warned Timothy that in later times people would not only depart from the faith, but there would be a tremendous rejection of God among the world's population as well. There will be a departure from the faith, apostasy, in the latter days as well as a rejec-

tion of the faith by most of the world's population. I would suggest both of those trends are very evident today. Just today I saw the results of a survey that discovered over 60% of practicing Christians have incorporated into their faith elements of Marxism, paganism, and secular humanism. In other words, people have departed from the faith to make up their own religion, which they often call spirituality, install themselves as their own god, and still call themselves Christians. Depending on whether or not they are actual believers or not, they are either apostate believers or unbelievers in rebellion against God.

1 Timothy 4:1-2 ¹But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away [ἀποστήσονται] from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, ²by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,

The Revised Standard Version, the English Standard Version, and the Holman Christian Standard Bible translate this "some will depart from" and that is a very accurate interpretation. In this context, Paul is warning Timothy that believers will depart from the faith by embracing false doctrines taught by demonic forces. That is exactly what we see today in Churchianity particularly in the Word of Faith churches that are overwhelmingly popular today. But many unbiblical elements are creeping into even the evangelical churches at what I see to be an alarming rate. It is also seen in mainstream denominational Christianity that has fully embraced the false gospel of Lordship salvation and a social justice gospel, abandoned literal hermeneutics and replaced that interpretive system with liberal, sociological hermeneutics, and embraced a religion of self-esteem and self-absorption. The point is, departure is an element of understanding how apostasy is to be understood. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3, it is contextually legitimate to understand the departure to be referring to the faithful departing before the Day of the Lord can begin. This is especially so when we understand that verse 1 was talking about the gathering together of the church to the Lord which Paul discussed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

2 Timothy 4:2-4 ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

Paul described the mindset and the worldview of mankind in the last days.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 ¹But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. ²For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than

lovers of God, ⁵holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these.

The point is, in the last days, people will depart from the Christian faith in terms of people who claim to be Christians but are not. There will also be believers who will be seduced by false doctrines propagated by false teachers who will also depart from sound doctrine and thereby abandon the true biblical Christian faith. Making matters worse, will be an attack on biblical Christianity in general as the self-indulgent world embraces more whole-heartedly Satan's agenda for bringing the world under his control. In other words, the world, at the end but before the Rapture and the Tribulation, is being set up to embrace a one world system of religion, government, and economics controlled by this man of lawlessness.

It will be in the midst of all this spiritual and societal chaos that the departure of the Church will take place, the Rapture, and only then the man of lawlessness will be revealed to begin his reign of destruction and rebellion against God.

Dr. Olander claims, "Apostasy has a basic root meaning of departure, departure from, or standing apart from." [David Olander, *The Pre-Day of the Lord Rapture*, p. 117]. He is more emphatic about the word meaning a departure than most of the lexicons seem to be. The question before us then, is who is departing from what? As a departure from something, the word has come to have a religious connotation, but it can be a departure by anyone from anything and it doesn't necessarily have to have the religious connotation we place on it. It can do so, but it doesn't have to do so.

There is a textual issue in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 whether the Day of the Lord is in view or the day of Christ. The Majority Text used by the King James translators has the day of Christ while the UBS text has Day of the Lord. In terms of the ultimate conclusion reached, it probably doesn't matter because at the end the interpretative conclusion is the same, but it does reflect on the matter troubling the believers in Thessalonica. If the correct reading is the day of Christ, they may have been thinking they completely missed the Rapture that they would have mistakenly thought had already taken place. If the correct reading is the Day of the Lord, they were thinking they were already in the Tribulation; therefore, Paul's previous teaching was at least confusing if not in error. Either way, Paul is confirming for them the fact of the Rapture followed by the Day of the Lord. Since Paul had taught them the Rapture first in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and then the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and since they were suffering persecution the fact of which some people were apparently using to convince them they were in the Tribulation, it seems preferable to think that the issue was the Day of the Lord. Either way, we know the Thessalonians were told they were not destined for wrath (1 Thess. 1:10, 5:9).

Here is Dr. Olander's explanation of just how Paul laid all this out. I believe he has the best explanation of this issue so his work is used here as the basis for the

presentation of these points. [David Olander, *The Pre-Day of the Lord Rapture*, pp. 117-128]. The words in brackets are explanatory remarks I added to his text.

1. The church is raptured which is the departure (1 Thess. 4:13-18).
2. The complete embodiment of the faith [the true Church] has departed (1 Thess. 5:1-11). [Even deceased believers have been resurrected and have departed from the earth.]
3. Faith in general has departed because there is not a believer left on the planet.
4. Concerning the above—the apostasy (complete)! [Planet earth is completely devoid of faith therefore completely apostate in that sense. In other words, with the Church gone, faith has totally departed.]

For the first time since Adam, there will not be one believer left on planet earth and only then will the man of lawlessness be revealed and the Day of the Lord begins. While there have been instances of various types and forms of apostasy (falling away or rebellion) within the church since Pentecost this is not the subject Paul is addressing. He is addressing the complete departure of the faith from earth that will only occur at the Rapture of the Church. The apostasy cannot be about a departure from the faith because, by definition, unbelievers can't depart from something they never embraced. That means people who call themselves Christians but are not born again will not depart; the apostasy, or departure, spoken of here does not apply to them either. The apostasy here is the departure of the faith leaving unbelievers on the earth to face God's wrath which the Church has not been appointed to undergo. The apostasy refers to a complete departure of faith from earth. That will change as the Day of the Lord gets underway and people come to faith during that time, but at the moment of the Rapture of the Church, faith has completely departed. Only then can the man of lawlessness be revealed and only then will the Day of the Lord begin.

Revelation 4:1

Many people see the Rapture in the command for John to "come up here," but as many or more claim it has nothing to do with it. Hermeneutics is the issue that divides people on their interpretation of this verse.

Revelation 4:1 ¹After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things."

Here is how one theologian stated his objection to finding the Rapture in this Scripture. Notably, this man does subscribe to a pretribulational Rapture; he just doesn't think it is found in this verse and many theologians agree with him. "This phrase is taken by many to prove the *pretribulational* Rapture of the church. This text, however, cannot prove

anything about the Rapture, for to apply this to the Rapture one must take John to be a type of the church, the call to 'come up hither' a type of the shout-command at the Rapture, and the third heaven as the destination of believers at the Rapture, all of which are tenuous connections at best. One cannot base a doctrine on a type, and proof of the timing of the Rapture must rest upon the direct statements of Scripture elsewhere. There is no need to search the Apocalypse for a direct mention of the pretribulation Rapture of the church, when the doctrine is clearly stated elsewhere." [Jerome Smith, *The New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* quoted by Tony Garland in *A Testimony of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, p. 1:285].

Tony Garland agrees with Smith this Scripture does not prove anything about the Rapture and other texts are needed to prove it, but he also believes it is a type of the Rapture in the same way the serpent raised up on a pole by the Israelites was a type of Christ (Num. 21:6-9) that Christ Himself referenced in John 3:14. Walvoord and Barnhouse also suggested the verse presents a type of the Rapture. Garland goes on to cite the parallels that Smith identified between this verse in its setting and the Rapture.

1. Like John, the saints will hear a verbal command at the Rapture (1 Th. 4:16).
2. Like John, the destination of those raptured is heaven (John 14:1-3; 1 Th. 4:17).
3. Like John, those raptured are *in Christ*—members of the Church which was created on the Day of Pentecost (1 Cor. 12:13).
4. John hears a voice as a trumpet. The raptured saints hear a voice *and* a trumpet (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Th. 4:16).
5. The command John hears, "Come up here!", also attends the *resurrection* of the two witnesses (Rev. 11:12).

Dr. Thomas does not believe this verse is about the Rapture. "[T]here is no authority for connecting John's summons with the rapture of the church. In fact, the two events are quite dissimilar in that John's body remained on Patmos throughout his experience, whereas at the rapture of the church the bodies of the saints will be transferred to heaven. Another basic difference is that John's summons is a command to receive revelation, but that of the church is one that accomplishes final salvation for the redeemed ones of the Body of Christ.... This summons is best understood as an invitation for John to assume a new vantage point for the sake of the revelation he was about to receive." [Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 337]. Interestingly, Thomas used George Eldon Ladd and Robert Mounce as sources for this conclusion neither of whom believe in a pretribulation Rapture of the Church. It is a bit disconcerting to me for pretribulation Rapture proponents to use non-pretribulation Rapture opponents to support denying the Rapture in any verse.

Dr. Constable said, "This is not an invitation for the church to enter heaven at the Rapture but an invitation for John to enter heaven in his vision." [Thomas Constable, *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible*, at Rev. 4:1]. MacArthur wrote, "Some see in this command a reference to the Rapture of the church. However, the verse does not describe

the church ascending to heaven in resurrected glorification, but John going to heaven to receive revelation.” [John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1-11*, p. 145].

I checked all the commentaries on Revelation I have access to concerning various interpretations of Revelation 4:1 and the Rapture which was 70 commentaries. 21 (30%) believed the Rapture was identified in this verse including Garland, Seiss, Hoyt, Feinberg, Ironside, Stedman, Barnhouse, Gaebelin, Hindson, LaHaye, and McGee. All of these men are dispensationalists with the exception of Seiss who was a Lutheran and I'm fairly certain he was not a dispensationalist. 12 of these authors (17.1%) specifically said the Rapture was not in this verse including MacArthur, Couch, Thomas, and Constable dispensationalists all, although MacArthur seems to have embraced Reformed Theology and abandoned dispensationalism over time. 37 theologians (52.9%) did not discuss the Rapture either way but that is most likely because they simply don't believe in it at all and deem it unworthy of mention. Ryrie waffled a bit on suggesting the Rapture was in this verse. He said that chronologically this is where it will occur but he never quite actually said it represents the Rapture.

The primary objection of dispensationalists to placing the Rapture in these verses is literal hermeneutics and I agree with that to a point. However, literal hermeneutics does allow for types and symbols to identify situations or doctrines to which they are pointing. The question is, is this a type of the Rapture? I'm not sold on the idea of the Rapture being in this verse, but at the very least, it does represent the time of the Rapture event in terms of chronology in the book of Revelation. I'm also not convinced it is a type of the Rapture primarily because I think types originate in the Old Testament with the anti-type appearing in the New Testament. I'm also not sure all the details are sufficiently similar to make it a type.

Revelation 12:5

Some theologians believe the Rapture of the Church is found in Revelation 12:5.

Revelation 12:5 ⁵And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up [ἀρπάξω] to God and to His throne.

Most theologians today do not consider this verse to be a Rapture verse, but in the past, it figured prominently in the Rapture debate. John Nelson Darby held this view and more recently, Harry Ironside and Dallas Theological Seminary professor Michael J. Svigel support this view. For further, deeper study on this issue, see Michael J. Svigel, “What Child is This? A Forgotten Argument for the Pretribulation Rapture” in John F. Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, pp.225-253. We will look at his very briefly; I'm simply introducing you to the idea that some dispensationalists in the past and a few in the present have used this verse as a basis for the pretribulation Rapture. Whether Svigel makes the case or not is open to question, but it deserves some investigation.

Darby's thinking was that the male child represented not only Christ but the corporate body of Christ who will rule and reign with Him and of whom Christ is the head; therefore, to catch the male child up is to catch up the corporate body of Christ with Him. In part, Darby based this connection on Revelation 2:26-27 in the letter to the church at Thyatira. His thinking was the connection Christ made with His promised rule in Psalm 2 to this promise to the Church formed a corporate singularity through which they would corporately rule. It is widely held throughout dispensational theology that believers will rule and reign with Christ, so this is not an illegitimate leap in Darby's train of thought.

Revelation 2:26–27 ²⁶‘He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; ²⁷AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received authority from My Father;

“Having concluded that Revelation primarily deals with events yet future, Darby saw in the vision of Revelation 12 a description of events associated with either the birth of the church or the future seven-year tribulation period. He therefore identified the woman in labor at the opening of the vision as a corporate symbol for the nation of Israel (Rev. 12:1). The dragon, desiring to devour her child, is Satan working through the evil world powers against God's people (12:2-4). Finally, Darby identified the male son in Revelation 12:5 as the mystical body of Christ, the church. Having been born from the woman (Israel), the male son (the church) is described in terms of the king Messiah in whose image this corporate body is to be conformed. Before the dragon is able to devour this mystical male son, however, he, the male son, is ‘caught up’ to God and to His throne.” [Michael J. Szigel, “What Child is This? A Forgotten Argument for the Pretribulation Rapture” in John F. Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, p. 229].

Darby contended that before Christ can rule, His body must be united with Him in fact and not just in position. “If the mighty man, the mystic man, the man-child of Revelation xii. Is to act [judging the world with a rod of iron], He must first be complete.... The head and the body must be united before He can act as having this title before the world; because the mystic man as a whole cannot take it until the Church is taken up to Him. For not until then—until the Church, the body, is united to the Head, Christ, in heaven—is the mystic man in that sense complete; and therefore, the Church must be taken up before Christ can come in judgment.” [John Nelson Darby, *Seven Lectures on the Prophetic Addresses to the Seven Churches*, pp. 153-154]. This is all quite correct; we know the Body of Christ will return with Him at the Second Advent to rule with Him, but whether or not that supports the Rapture in this Scripture is probably debatable.

Ironside wrote, “Is there any incongruity in understanding the man-child to represent both Christ Jesus our Lord and His church? Surely not, for He is the Head of the body, the church, which is the fullness, or completion, of Himself, so that the title ‘the Christ’ is applied to both head and body viewed as one in 1 Corinthians 12:12, where we read, ‘For

as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is [the] Christ.' It reads literally, 'the Christ.' We may then, on the authority of Scripture itself, safely affirm that the man-child represents the one New Man who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron—Christ, the Head, and the church, His body." [H. A. Ironside, *An Ironside Expository Commentary: Revelation*, p. 121].

Svigel makes the point that it is entirely consistent within Revelation 12:1-6 to understand the male son as a symbol of the Church as the Body of Christ. "Identifying the male son as the body of Christ is fully consistent with the symbolism of the vision recorded in Revelation 12:1-6. If the woman represents a corporate entity (Israel through the ages), and if the dragon represents a corporate entity (the satanic world system through the ages with Satan at its head), then it is entirely consistent with the apocalyptic symbolism of the vision for the male son to represent the church as the body of Christ through the ages, with Christ as its head." [Michael J. Svigel, "What Child is This? A Forgotten Argument for the Pretribulation Rapture" in John F. Hart, *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, p. 232]. No dispensationalist would argue with the fact the woman represents Israel and the dragon represents Satan. One could argue that Svigel's position in favor of the male son as a symbol of the Body of Christ with Christ as the Head is a legitimate exegetical inference in Revelation 12:1-6 within itself related to the other components of the pericope.

It is obvious that the symbols in Revelation 12:1 correspond to the symbols in Joseph's dream in Genesis 37:9 and the seven heads and ten horns correspond to Daniel 7:1-8. Both of these symbols involve corporate identification. Because those two elements of the Scripture have a corporate identity, the thinking is the male son has a corporate identity as well. Isaiah 66:7-8, refers to giving birth to a land and a nation. He also makes a connection with Daniel 7 between the Son receiving a Kingdom and the corporate link to the saints who inherit the Kingdom (Dan. 7:22).

Finally, the Greek word translated "caught up" is *ἁρπάζω* which is the same word used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to describe the nature of the departure of the Church to be with the Lord. It involves a forcible snatching away. In contrast, the method the Lord used to return to the Father was a gradual ascent describing a simple move from one place to another. The context of Revelation 12:5 is rescue from Satan which implies a more immediate and drastic removal.

I'm not convinced the Rapture is in this verse, but it is worth a serious investigation by anyone studying the Rapture doctrine.

Concerning Rapture passages, I want to end by informing you that some people do identify the Rapture in some Old Testament passages. This seems to be problematic to me because Paul specifically said the Rapture was a mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:51 and a mystery was something not revealed in the Old Testament that was revealed in the

New Testament. It also seems to be reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament which is a violation of literal hermeneutics.

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