

The Rapture in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–10



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The Context

In verses one and two, Paul states: “Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.” (All Bible quotations are from the King James Version.)

Several things may be said about these verses. (1) Paul is writing to the Thessalonian believers about the rapture. “The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” is further described in verse one as “our gathering together unto him.” (2) He writes to them because they were in danger of being troubled, and this disturbance was being caused by three things: “by spirit” (a false prophet—cf. 1 John 4:1), “by word” (a false preacher—cf. 1 Cor. 1:18) and “by letter, as [if] from us” (a false letter with Paul’s forged signature). (3) The false teaching which these three sources presented and which disturbed the Thessalonians was that “the day of Christ” had come. (Some Greek texts read “day of the Lord” rather than “day of Christ,” but in either case, this “day” refers to the time when Christ will directly intervene in human affairs by bringing destruction upon the world.) (4) Furthermore, the verb that is translated “is at hand” is in the perfect tense and thus signifies completed past action with present results. Thus, the false teaching was that the day of Christ the Lord had arrived and was now present. (5) This “day” refers not to the rapture (obviously the Thessalonians would know that the rapture had not yet taken place), but to the Tribulation, Second Coming, and the Millennium (Zechariah 14:1–4, 9, cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 229–231). Thus, the issue which

disturbed the Thessalonians was that they were being told that they were now in the end-time Tribulation. We know from 2 Thessalonians 1:4 that these believers were already suffering persecution, so this conclusion was not farfetched.

Paul's purpose, then, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–10 is to show these believers that they were not in the Tribulation. In v. 3, he states that two things must occur before the Tribulation can begin: (1) the "falling away," and (2) the revelation of the man of sin. For those aware of Daniel's prophecy (9:26) that "the prince that shall come" will confirm a covenant with many for seven years and then break it "in the midst of the week," the lawless man of sin is made known when he confirms the covenant, not when he breaks it. II Thessalonians 2:4 indicates the identity of this man rather than the time of his revelation by relating him to Daniel's prophecy.

The Removal of the Restrainer is the Rapture

There have been various views concerning the identity of the restrainer. Dr. Pentecost lists five of them as follows: (1) the restrainer was the Roman Empire, (2) the restrainer was human government and law, (3) the restrainer is Satan, (4) the restrainer is the church, and (5) the restrainer is the Holy Spirit (Pentecost, *Things To Come*, 259–62). Several comments should be made about these views. First, the restrainer could not be the Roman empire because such a view limits the restrainer to the past, while Paul indicates that the one being restrained (the man of sin) will live in the future, during the day of the Lord. Second, human government will continue to exist even when the man of sin is revealed; therefore human government cannot be the restrainer, since the man of sin is revealed AFTER the restrainer is removed (2 Thessalonians 2:7, 8). Third, Satan cannot be the restrainer because a house divided against itself will fall. Fourth, the church alone cannot be the restrainer because the one being restrained has "all power and signs and lying wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Nevertheless, in verse six, some thing is doing the restraining, while in verse seven, the restrainer is a person, so the church could be involved in the restraining process. Fifth, the Holy Spirit is the restrainer because only a member of the Godhead is able to restrain this man of sin who is empowered by Satan.

While all three Persons of the Godhead are omnipresent, the Father is resident in heaven, and the Son is resident at the Father's right hand. It is the Holy Spirit, the third Person in the Godhead, who came on the Day of Pentecost. Notice carefully the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ to those who believe in Him: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37–38). The inspired interpretation of this promise is given in the very next verse: "But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive; for the Holy Ghost was not yet given, because that Jesus was not yet glorified." On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to create the Body of Christ by placing believers into that Body (1 Corinthians 12:13a), and He came to indwell the physical bodies of every member of that Body (1 Corinthians 12:13b).

2 Thessalonians 2:7 tells us the Restrainer will restrain "until he be taken out of the way." Some have said this expression cannot refer to a spatial removal but only to a stepping aside (cf. The MacArthur Study Bible note at 2 Thessalonians 2:7). However, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* (2nd ed., revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's 5th ed., 1979) lists this very verse as an example of this word's use "to denote change of location" (page 159, bottom right-hand column). The third edition of this work, published in 2000, gives 2 Thessalonians 2:7 as an example of the sixth use of the word: "to make a change of location in space" (bottom of page 198 and top of 199). The removal of the Restrainer, then, refers to the departure of the Holy Spirit in the rapture of the Church.

The “Falling Away” is the Rapture

Two possible solutions have been presented as to the identity of the “falling away.” The first solution is the one traditionally given and is still the most popular view today. It understands the “falling away” as a great apostasy or departure from the faith. Almost any standard commentary will defend this position. For a detailed defense of this view see *The Thessalonian Epistles* by D. Edmond Hiebert. Basically the argument is that the Greek word translated “falling away” means a religious apostasy. The second solution which is possible understands the “falling away” as a reference to the rapture of the church. This view is defended by E. Schuyler English in his book, *Re-Thinking the Rapture*.

There are four reasons which, when taken together, seem to indicate that Paul was referring to the rapture when he mentioned this term.

Reason # 1: The word which is translated “falling away” can refer to a physical departure. Note that this argument does not say that the word always or even normally has this meaning. “Departure, disappearance” is the second meaning given for this Greek word in *A Greek-English Lexicon*, by Liddell & Scott, I, 218. Part of the problem here is that this word is used only twice in the New Testament—here and also in Acts 21:21, where Paul is told that some accuse him of teaching a departure from Moses. In this latter passage, this word is used in the sense of a religious apostasy. In the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), this word or an older form is found in Joshua 22:22, 1 Kings 21:13, 2 Chronicles 29:19, 33:19, Isaiah 30:1, and Jeremiah 2:19. In these cases, the word also has the idea of religious departure. However, either the context or a descriptive phrase is used to indicate that a religious apostasy is meant. Therefore it might be argued that the word itself was more general.

In the New Testament, the verb form of this word is used fifteen times (Luke 2:27, 4:13, 8:13, 22:29; Acts 5:37,38, 12:10, 15:38, 19:9, 22:29; 2 Corinthians 12:8; 1 Timothy 4:1, 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:19; and Hebrews 3:12). Of the fifteen references, only three have reference to a religious departure, and these three are qualified by context (Luke 8:13) or by a descriptive phrase (1 Timothy 4:1—“from the faith” and Hebrews 3:12—“from the living God”). It is clear from some of the remaining references that a physical departure is meant (the angel who delivered Peter from prison departed from him—Acts 12:10, and Paul prayed that a thorn in the flesh might depart from him—2 Corinthians 12:8.) This word is translated *departynge* by William Tyndale (c. 1526), by Cranmer (1539), and by the Geneva Bible (1557). Beza (1565) translated it *departing*.

Reason # 2: The use of the definite article (“the”) lends support to the view that the falling away is the rapture. The basic function of the article “is to point out an object or to draw attention to it. Its use with a word makes the word stand out distinctly,” (Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 137). Paul is not speaking of A falling away but THE falling away. In all probability, Paul is referring to some subject he has previously discussed with the Thessalonians. Robertson agrees with this use of the article in this verse. He states: “And the use of the definite article (the) seems to mean that Paul had spoken to the Thessalonians about it.” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, 49). Now, if this is the use of the article in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, one would expect to find a place, either in 1 or 2 Thessalonians, where Paul previously referred to a departure from the faith. This writer knows of no such reference. However, there is previous reference to the rapture of the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1.

Reason # 3: Paul’s style of writing in this chapter also lends support to the idea that the “falling away” is the rapture. In verse 3, Paul states that two events must occur before the day of the Lord can come, namely (1) the “falling away,” and (2) the revealing of the man of sin. Paul’s reference to this second event seems to be more fully

described in verses 8–9. If, indeed, this is Paul’s style, then verses 6 and 7, which describe the removal of the Holy Spirit and the church, would be a more detailed explanation of the first event in verse 3 (the “falling away”).

Reason # 4: Paul’s purpose in writing lends support to the view that the “falling away” is the rapture. Remember the setting. The Thessalonian believers were being persecuted for their faith, and they thought they were in the Tribulation. Paul writes to tell them that they can’t possibly be in the Tribulation because two things have to occur before the Tribulation can begin: the “falling away” and the revelation of the man of sin. If religious apostasy is a means by which Paul expects the Thessalonians to know whether or not they are in the Tribulation, then he has failed to prove his point because there has always been religious apostasy, even in the time of the apostle Paul, and the Thessalonians were not in a position to distinguish any present apostasy from “THE apostasy.” However, if Paul was referring to the rapture of the church, then the Thessalonians could know with certainty that they could not yet be in the Tribulation.

Conclusion

If both the removal of the Restrainer and the “falling away” refer to the rapture of the Church, then II Thessalonians 2:1–10 offers two proofs for the rapture occurring before the Tribulation.