

The Use of Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3

by

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The Apostle Paul founded the church at Thessalonica on his second missionary journey in the winter of 50-51 A.D. He spent three months there (Nov. through January).¹ During his stay, he taught them many things; but one of his major themes was that of suffering and affliction:

"For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and it came to pass, as you know" (1 Thess. 3:1-4).²

He wanted them to understand that suffering and affliction was a normal aspect of the Christian life. In addition, he had also instructed them about a future time of severe wrath that was to come upon the whole world.

After he had been with them for approximately three months, he left and traveled to Berea and then Athens. Timothy and Silas remained in Berea, but soon returned to Thessalonica to strengthen and encourage the brethren:

"Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left in Athens alone; and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the Gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith. So that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this" (1 Thess. 3:1-3).

Paul then traveled to Corinth where Timothy, upon his return from Thessalonica, joined him. Timothy brought a report to Paul that was in most respects very positive – they were growing in their faith and standing firm in the midst of suffering and affliction:

"You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:6-10).

"And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did

¹ *Chronology of the Apostolic Age*, unpublished class notes by Harold Hoehner, 1974.

² All Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all man, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the uttermost" (1 Thess. 2:13).

In response to Timothy's report, Paul wrote a letter to them. In it he reminded them that they were waiting "for [God's] Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10). He also addressed issues concerning their spiritual growth and walk with the Lord. But sandwiched in between those exhortations (from 4:13 to 5:11), he dealt with two major issues that grew out of their concern about the afflictions that they were suffering.

Some of those in the church had died -- perhaps even in the midst of persecution. What about them? Would they see them again? And if so, When?

In chapter 4, verses 13 and 14 he states,

"We do not want you to be uninformed brethren, about those who are asleep (dead), so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."

As he explains the chain of events that will occur in the future, he tells them:

"For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not proceed those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

The "coming" of the Lord is described by the Greek term *parousia* (Gr. Παρουσία) [this term will become a significant time marker later], and the expression "caught up" is the Greek term *harpazo* (Gr. ἁρπάζω).

The term *harpazo* (Gr. ἁρπάζω) means to snatch or seize, i.e. take suddenly and vehemently; steal, carry off, take away.³ Others have added the thought of taking away by force, to snatch away, to transport hastily.⁴ The concept of *harpazo* (Gr. ἁρπάζω), being snatched away or removed suddenly by force, can be vividly illustrated in the following passages:

"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force (*harpazo* Gr. ἁρπάζω)" (Matt. 11:12).

"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away (*harpazo* Gr. ἁρπάζω) what has been sown in his heart" (Matt. 13:19a).

³ Arndt, W., Gingrich, F. W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. 1996, c1979. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature : A translation and adaptation of the fourth revised and augmented edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schrift en des Neuen Testaments und der ubrigen urchristlichen Literatur* . University of Chicago Press: Chicago, p. 109.

⁴ *A Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament*, T. S. Green, editor, p. 23.

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows – such a man was caught up (harpazo Gr. ἀρπάζω) to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2).

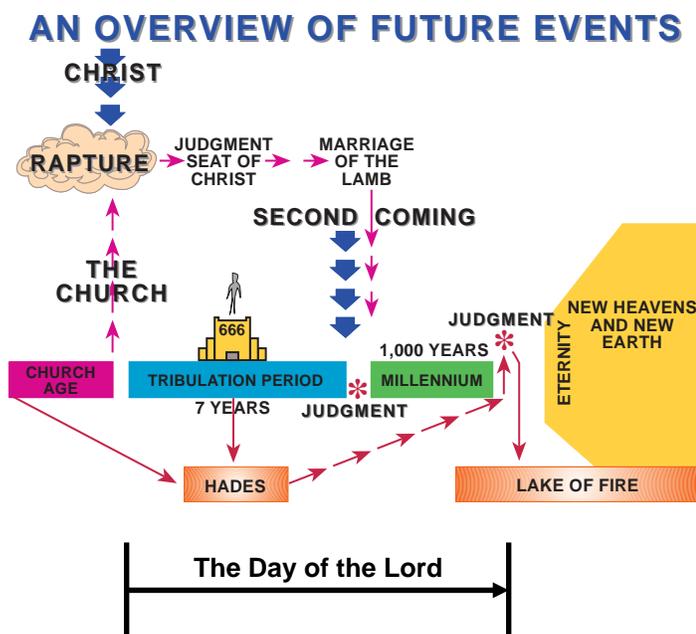
“When they had come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away (harpazo Gr. ἀρπάζω); and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39).

What Paul is saying is simply this: When the Lord comes in the clouds for the Church, all who comprise the Church will be “snatched away” to join Him in the clouds; and from that time on, will always be with the Lord. This is the event popularly referred to as the Rapture of the Church.

But what about the "Day of the Lord" and the wrath associated with that period of time?

The prophet Amos spoke long ago about this same day. He describes the day of the Lord as a day of darkness, when a historical judgment would overtake Israel (5:18-20). This means nothing less than captivity beyond Damascus (8:27). Yet beyond this historical judgment Amos sees a further visitation: the eschatological Day of the Lord. The future holds a day of universal judgment (7:4; 8:8f; 9:5) and, beyond that, a day of salvation when the house of David will be revived, Israel restored, and the earth become a blessing (9:11-15). God will judge His people for their sins in a historical judgment, but He will finally redeem them in the kingdom of God.⁵

The chart below represents the major aspects of that day:



The Day of the Lord begins with the removal of the Church and ends with the Great White Throne judgment (Rev. 20).

⁵ Bromiley, G. W. 1988; 2002. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, Vol. 1, p. 513.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul briefly describes the wrath of that day (the Tribulation). He tells them that the “wrath” of God (cf. v. 9) – the “destruction” (v.3), is for unbelievers – “them,” not “us.” In fact, we will be absent during that time, “for God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 9).

The important question is this: What does Paul mean by the term “salvation?” The Greek term is *soteria* (Gr. σωτηρία). The noun and its verb, *sozo* (Gr. σώζω), share the same conceptual meaning: preserve or rescue from natural dangers and afflictions; save or preservation from eternal death.⁶ The unifying concept of the terms seems to be, to deliver. The contextual question would be: Deliver from what?

There are several different ways that the concept of *sozo* (Gr. σώζω) is illustrated in the New Testament:

1. delivered from the penalty of sin (Eph. 2:5)
2. delivered from sickness [healed] (Mark 5:34; Ac. 14:9)
3. delivered from sleep [wake up] (John 11:12)
4. delivered from a perverse generation (Ac. 2:40)
5. delivered from Egypt (Ac. 7:25)
6. delivered from drowning (Ac. 27:30, 31)
7. delivered from prison (Phil. 1:19)
8. delivered from the wrath of the day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:9)

Earlier, in 1 Thess. 5:10, Paul used the term *hruomai* (Gr. ῥύομαι) (actually, the participle *ton hruomenon* (Gr. τὸν ῥυόμενον), when he referred to Jesus as the one “who delivers us from the wrath to come.” Conceptually, both *sozo* (Gr. σώζω) (5:9) and *hupomai* (Gr. ῥύομαι) (1:10) mean the same thing.⁷ Consider some examples of the use of *hruomai* (Gr. ῥύομαι) in the New Testament. Remember, as with *sozo* (Gr. σώζω), the question is, delivered from what?

1. delivered from evil (Matt. 6:13)
2. delivered from the hand of our enemies (Luke 1:74)
3. delivered from this body of death (Rom. 7:24)
4. delivered from ungodliness (Rom. 11:26)
5. delivered from those who are disobedient (Rom. 15:31)
6. delivered from perverse and evil men (2 Thess. 3:2)
7. delivered Lot from Sodom (2 Pet. 2:7)

⁶ Arndt, W., Gingrich, F. W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. 1996, c1979. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature : A translation and adaption of the fourth revised and augmented edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schrift en des Neuen Testaments und der ubrigen urchristlichen Literatur* . University of Chicago Press: Chicago, p. 798.

⁷ Ibid, p. 737.

Paul uses both terms, *hruomai* (Gr. ῥύομαι) in 1:10 and *sozo* (Gr. σώζω) in 5:9, to explain that the Lord will deliver believers from the wrath of the day of the Lord.

As an aside, in Romans 11:26 Paul refers to Isaiah 59:20 and the future deliverance of Israel when he says, “The Deliverer (ho *hruomenos*; Gr. ὁ ῥυόμενος) will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.” It highlights the fact that Jesus Christ is the Deliverer of His people – the Church at the *harpazo* (Gr. ἄρπάζω) event, and Israel at the time of the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom.

The Apostasia (Gr. ἀποστασία)

As we come to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, the context is once again dealing with the *parousia* (Gr. Παρουσία) (coming) of our Lord, and our "gathering together to Him" (v. 1). Paul states it thus:

“Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of the Lord and our gathering together to Him, that you may 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. Let no one deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (2 Thess. 2:1-3).

Since Paul's first letter, the Thessalonians had encountered some very difficult teaching – and it was causing many to become disturbed and doubtful. There were those who were teaching that the day of the Lord had come, that they were already experiencing it. Apparently they were saying that they had had a vision or had heard Paul or one of his associates teach, that the day of the Lord had come. These teachers had apparently related their current sufferings and afflictions to the wrath of the day of the Lord. And in spite of what Paul had written previously, some were becoming very disturbed and in danger of being led astray.

In verse 3, he once again emphasizes to them that "that day (implied from the context) will not come unless the apostasy (Gr. ἀποστασία) comes first." Now the important question is this: in what sense does Paul use *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία)? The meaning of *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία) is rebellion, departure.⁸ Its verb form is *aphistemi* (Gr. ἀφίστημι), which means revolt, withdraw, depart.⁹ The most basic conceptual meaning of both terms is a departure.

Apostasia (Gr. ἀποστασία) is used only twice in the New Testament: to forsake [depart from] the teachings of Moses (Ac. 21:21), and the apostasy [departure] of 2 Thess. 2:3.

It is worth noting that the earliest English translations consistently translated *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία) as either departure or departing (1384, Wycliffe Bible; 1526, Tyndale Bible; 1535, Coverdale Bible; 1539, Cranmer Bible; 1576, Breeches Bible). It was not until the King James version of 1611 that *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία) began to be translated in an alternative way, i.e., “falling away,” or transliterated simply as “apostasy.”

Apostasia (Gr. ἀποστασία) is also used to describe civil, religious, or spatial departure. In the Old Testament (LXX) it is used mostly of departing from or rebelling against the Law of Moses

⁸ Ibid, p. 98.

⁹ Ibid, p. 126.

– as one would naturally expect since both civil and religious issues involved the same code of law (see 1 Esdras 2:22-23; 2Chron. 29:19; 33:19; Jer. 2:19).

In the culture of the first century, we see *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία) used by the historian, Josephus, in a political sense (Jos. Vit., 43). Used in this way it signifies a rebellion against civil authority. It has also been used of the departure of a fever from an ill person.¹⁰

In the New Testament, the verb *aphistemi* (Gr. ἀφίστημι) is used fourteen times. The following is a representative list:

1. she never left [departed from] the temple (Lk. 2:37)
2. the devil departed from Him (Lk. 4:13)
3. the angel departed from Peter (Ac. 12:10)
4. him (John Mark) who had deserted [departed from] them (Ac. 15:38)
5. that it [thorn in the flesh] might depart (2 Cor. 12:8)
6. fall away from [depart from] the faith (1 Tim. 4:1)
7. abstain from [depart from] wickedness (2 Tim. 2:19)

If *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία) is understood to mean departure, the important question in the context of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is this: Is there any departure mentioned in the immediate context? The answer is clearly, yes, “our gathering together unto Him” at His *parousia* (Gr. παρουσία). The day of the Lord mentioned in verse 2 is the same time of wrath Paul mentioned in I Thessalonians 5:2, and the same wrath from which our Lord will deliver us at His *parousia* (Gr. παρουσία) (see 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). That deliverance will be through the *harpazo* (Gr. ἁρπάζω) – when we are snatched away to meet Him in the clouds. There is no warrant at all in the context of 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2 to understand *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία) as “religious apostasy.” The context always controls the ultimate meaning of a word!

What is the theological significance of this meaning in terms of the snatching away of the Church? Simply this: The snatching away of the church must take place before the day of the Lord begins.¹¹

¹⁰ Liddell, H. G., Scott, R., Jones, H. S., & McKenzie, R. 1996. *A Greek-English lexicon*. "With a revised supplement, 1996." (Rev. and augm. throughout /). Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press: Oxford; New York., p. 218.

¹¹ This view is shared by such notable scholars as J. Dwight Pentecost, Kenneth Wuest, Allen MacRae, E. Schuyler English, Stanley Ellison, H. Wayne House, et al.