

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

(PART 3)

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 installments 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. 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 be used very clearly to refer to physical departures. 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 Verb *Aphistēmi* Can Refer to a Physical Departure

Words are ultimately derived from roots. From a common root one can develop both a noun form and a verbal form of a word. Sometimes in English we use the same word for both a noun and a verb. For example, if I said, “Jane went on a run,” I would be using “run” as a noun. However, if I said “see Jan run,” I would be using “run” as a verb. The verb form of the noun *apostasia* is the verb *aphistēmi*. Both the noun and verbal form emanate from the same root, (*hístēmi* - to cause to stand, to set or place).

As in the previous installment mentioned the noun *apostasia* is only mentioned twice in the Greek New Testament (Acts 21:21; 2 Thess. 2:3a). However, the verbal form *aphistēmi* is found 15 times in the New Testament. Interestingly, only three times does that verb *aphistēmi* mean a spiritual departure. For example, it is used of a spiritual departure in Luke 8:13 where it says, “Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.” “Fall away” is the English translation of *aphistēmi*, which refers to a spiritual departure. Similarly, First Timothy 4:1 says, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in latter times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.” Again, “fall away” or *aphistēmi* refers to a spiritual departure here. In addition, Hebrews 3:12 says, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.” Again, “fall away” or *aphistēmi* refers to a spiritual departure apostasy.

However, the majority of times where *aphistēmi*, is used in the Greek New Testament it does not refer to a spiritual departure, but rather to a physical departure. Thus,

while this verb is used 15 times, only three times does it mean a spiritual departure. The remaining twelve times it clearly means a physical departure. For example, Luke 2:37 says, “and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four, she never left the temple.” Here, *aphistēmi* is used to indicate that she never physically “left” the temple. Luke 4:13 also says, “When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.” Here, *aphistēmi* or “left” is used to indicate the physical removal or departure of Satan from Jesus. Similarly, in Luke 13:27, Jesus says, “DEPART FROM ME ye workers of iniquity.” Again, *aphistēmi* is used here in reference to their physical departure from Christ.

Acts 5:38 similarly records Gamaliel saying, “So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men.” In other words, *aphistēmi* is used to record Gamaliel’s exhortation for the unbelieving Jews to physically remove themselves from the apostles and the early church. Acts 12:10 also says, regarding Peter, “...the angel departed from him.” Again, *aphistēmi* is used to depict the angel’s physical departure from Peter. Moreover, Acts 15:38 says, “But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along with them who had deserted them...” Here, *aphistēmi* is used about Mark’s earlier decision to leave the missionary team (Acts 13:13). What did Mark do on that first missionary journey? He did not spiritually depart. Rather, the primary meaning is that he physically departed from them. Acts 19:9 similarly says, “But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them.” Again, *aphistēmi* translated “withdrew” is used about a physical departure.

Second Corinthians 12:8, concerning Paul’s thorn in the flesh also says, “Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.” “Leave” is translated from the Greek verb *aphistēmi* and it again is speaking of Paul’s desire for the Lord to remove this physical infirmity from him. What all these usages demonstrate is that both the noun *apostasia* and the verb *aphistēmi* can both be used to depict either spiritual departures or physical departures.

The Extended Context Favors a Physical Departure Interpretation of *Apostasia*

Since these words can be used in either sense, what rules should be used to determine which meaning to supply? While the three rules of real estate are “location, location, location,” the three rules of Bible study interpretation are “context, context, context!” Context is king when determining the meanings of words. This is especially true since words frequently have multiple meanings.

Take the word “apple” as an example. Think how many meanings can be generated from the single word “apple.” It can refer to a computer, a piece of fruit, the pupil of one’s eye, and even New York City. So, when you see the word “apple” in a paragraph how do you know what meaning is in play? The context answers that question. If the word apple is found in a context dealing with computers, it would be invalid to substitute a fruit understanding into the word “apple.” As another example, note how many different meanings there are for the word “run?”

I **ran** out of ingredients for the salad, so I decided to make a quick **run** to the store. While at the store I left the car engine **running** while I made my purchase, thinking that I would be right out again. However, while I was in the store I **ran** into a good friend Edward who was **running** for county supervisor. This resulted in me having to endure a somewhat longwinded **rundown** on how his campaign was **running**. Finally fearing that the car would **run** out of gas I **ran** with great haste into the parking lot and returned home with the care surely **running** on fumes.²

Notice how the word “run” can radically change just within one paragraph. So how do we determine the meanings of words? They are entirely context driven. Therefore, we must be careful to determine the meaning of a word from its immediate context. Since, as has been demonstrated, the verb *aphistēmi* and the noun *apostasia* can both refer to either a physical departure or a spiritual departure let us now examine both the immediate and extended context of Second Thessalonians 2:3a to ascertain if a spiritual or physical departure is in view.

The extended context favors the meaning physical departure. What do I mean by “extended context”? I am referring to both books, 1–2 Thessalonians, since both were written in close proximity to one another. Interestingly, in First Thessalonians every single chapter ends with a reference to the return of Jesus (1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19-20; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:23-38). In fact, the most detailed treatment of the rapture that we have in the entire Bible is found at the end of the fourth chapter of First Thessalonians (4:13-18). Since the “context is king” in determining the meaning of the *apostasia* and the larger context of the Thessalonian letters pertain to the return of Christ, interpreters should be open to a physical departure understanding of the word. Thus, the larger context of these two books does not favor spiritual departure interpretation of the *apostasia*, but rather it favors the physical departure view.

In the this and the prior installment we noted the first six 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 be used very clearly to refer to a physical departure. Also, the verb emanating from the same root can be used very clearly to refer to a physical departure. Thus, the extended context and the immediate context must be consulted to define the meaning of *apostasia* in Second Thessalonians 2:3a. The extended context favors the physical departure rendering of *apostasia*.

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 George A. Gunn, "Jesus and the Rapture: John 14," in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 110.