

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Revelation		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	25		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE DAY OF THE LORD (Part 1)

In his popular commentary on these Epistles, Warren Wiersbe has made the following observation: "The purpose of Bible prophecy is not for us to make a calendar, but to build character. . . . Date-setters are usually up-setters, and that is exactly what happened in the Thessalonian assembly."¹ He is referring, of course, to the problem that Paul is addressing here in chapter two. Evidently, someone had deceived these believers into thinking that because of the persecution they were experiencing, they were already living in the Day of the Lord. The reason they were disturbed over this was, as Paul reminded them (2 Thess. 2:5), that the Day of the Lord *could not* precede the tribulation. In this passage, therefore, Paul again reiterates this for them, explaining that certain tribulational events *have* to take place before the Day of the Lord *can* begin. Paul is *not* seeking to comfort the Thessalonians by promising them an *escape* from the tribulation (Pretribulationism).² The context and transition into this passage is extremely important to notice. Paul neither makes nor implies *any* distinction between his description of the post-tribulation second coming of Christ "in flaming fire" to smite the wicked (1:7-10), and his description of the Lord's coming and our "gathering together with Him" in the opening verse of 2:1. In light of the immediately preceding description of the post-tribulation coming of Christ, it seems only natural to regard the "coming" of 2:1 as another reference to that *same* event.³ This becomes even more obvious several verses later, when Paul again refers to the "coming" of the Lord Jesus at the Second Advent, when the antichrist shall be destroyed after the tribulation (2:8), then there can be little question that these two references to the Lord's "coming" are descriptions of one and the same event. At the Second Advent, the saints will be raptured and the antichrist will be destroyed. In light of this purpose, Paul teaches in this passage that these readers should not be shaken by reports that they are in the Day of the Lord, because the prominent signs of the Day's presence were not yet in evidence (2:1-12).

- I. **THE TWO EVENTS THAT WILL PRECEDE THE RETURN OF CHRIST.** No one should be disturbed by the teaching that the Day of the Lord is present, because the apostasy and the man of sin must appear first, just as Paul has previously taught (2:1-5). As already stated, what was troubling these readers was a certain false teaching which claimed apostolic authority and which came to them either by means of "a spirit" (i.e., some prophetic utterance given supposedly under the power of the Holy Spirit), "a word" (i.e., some oral teaching), or "an epistle" (some written communication). Specifically, this eschatological error taught that the Day of the Lord had already come. It is important to note that the subject of Paul's appeal concerns the "coming" of the Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together with Him (2:1); his subject in verse 2, however, passes to the "Day of the Lord" without any apparent shift in thought. It seems clear from this that Paul is identifying the coming of the Lord and the rapture of the Church (2:1) with the Day of the Lord (2:2). This cannot but point to a post-tribulational rapture, since the entire point of this passage is

that the Day of the Lord will not/cannot begin until after the tribulation. The reason the Day of the Lord has not yet occurred is because two tribulational events must first precede it. These two events are separate, yet very closely related. First, “the apostasy” must come.⁴ This is clearly a reference to the Church “falling away” from its profession of faith in Christ because of its fear of martyrdom under the reign of antichrist during the tribulation. Perhaps the most concise description of the religious apostasy is given by Hiebert (a noted pre-tribulationist): The first sign, which Paul insists must precede the Day of the Lord, is “the falling away” (*hē apostasia*), the term from which our English word apostasy is derived. It denotes a deliberate abandonment of a formerly professed position or view, a defection, a rejection of a former allegiance. In classical Greek, it was used to denote a political or military rebellion; in the Septuagint, it was used of rebellion against God (Joshua 22:22); in 1 Maccabees 2:15 (the Apocrypha), it is used of the enforcement of apostasy to paganism. The religious connotation appears in the use of the term in the New Testament (Acts 21:21; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:3-4; Heb. 3:12). Obviously Paul’s sign has reference to the apostasy within the circle of the professing Christian church. Such a defection within the ranks of Christ’s followers began early, as indicated in the Pastoral Epistles. The history of the Christian church has repeatedly shown periods of declension and apostasy from the truth of the gospel. By his use of the definite article, in the “falling away,” Paul clearly points to the well-known apostasy, “the great revolt,”⁵ which will characterize Christendom in the end-time (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Pet. 2:1-11; 3:3-6; Jude). The expression points to an expected apostasy concerning which Paul knew that the readers were informed (cf. v. 5). No further elaboration of the apostasy is given here.⁶ The second tribulation event that must precede the coming of the Day of the Lord is the revelation of “the man of sin.” Clearly this is a reference to “the antichrist.” Paul’s teaching therefore is that the revealing of this person, together with the widespread apostasy that will occur during his reign, must occur before the Day of the Lord begins. Further, verse 8 indicates that Christ’s coming (i.e., Day of the Lord) could not occur until these events fully materialized because one of the purposes of His coming was to destroy this man of sin (v. 8). Thus the Day of the Lord cannot occur until after the tribulation period. Interestingly enough, this teaching already had been given to these readers when Paul was first with them. This clearly indicates why they were so disturbed over the false teachers’ message; it clearly contradicted the Apostle’s former teaching.

- II. ***THE LAWLESS ONE: HIS CHARACTER, ACTIVITY, AND END.*** The descriptive terms of this all point to a definite eschatological individual with certain characteristics: “the man of sin” indicates his evil character; the “son of destruction” indicates his certain doom; “opposing and exalting himself against every so-called god . . .” depicts his blasphemous activity; “sitting in the Temple of God, setting himself forth as God” indicates his self-deification. Kim Riddlebarger notes that: “The first critical question faced by Paul’s interpreters has to do with the identification of the Man of Lawlessness. Paul’s Thessalonian readers clearly knew what he meant, since he reminds them, *Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?* (2 Thess. 2:5). While Paul’s readers had the benefit of Paul’s personal instruction regarding these matters when he had been present with them some months earlier, the matter is much more difficult for us. We don’t know for sure what Paul told the Thessalonians when he was with them, but we can make a pretty good guess based upon the contents of Paul’s two letters.

Contemporary Interpretations of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

	Identity Of Man of Sin	Identity of the Restrainer	Paul's Reference to the Temple of God (2:4)
Preterism (prophecy is already fulfilled)	Nero or succession of Roman emperors	The Jewish commonwealth or the Roman Empire	Paul is referring to the Jerusalem temple, still standing before AD 70
Historicism (prophecy refers to the papacy)	The current pope or the papacy as an office	The preaching of the gospel	Paul is speaking of the church
Dispensationalism (the prophecy is yet future)	Future Antichrist	The Holy Spirit	A rebuilt temple in Jerusalem
Reformed Amillennialism (the prophecy is future)	Future Antichrist	The angel of Revelation, the providence of God, or the preaching of the gospel ⁷	Paul is speaking of the church

CONCLUSION: Jesus said that the devil is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). He is the great deceiver. Tasker's comments are to the point: "As God is One who makes the wrath of man to praise Him (Ps. lxxvi. 10), His purposes are being worked out even in the evil that men (or Satan) do. In particular, God uses the evil consequences of sin as part of the punishment of the sinner. Thus in Romans i, the consequences of men's sin are not viewed as the result of the operation of an impersonal process, but three times it is said that *God gave them up* to the consequences in question (verses 24, 26, 28). God's hand is in the process whereby the sinner receives the fitting recompense of his sin. So here Paul sees it as due to God that those who reject the gospel come to believe a lie. *For this cause* refers us back to the preceding verse and the statement that those concerned had refused to receive the love of the truth. It is the law of life that those who take this step go further and further astray into error. The word *God* is in an emphatic position, emphasizing that what follows is not mere chance or natural law, but the result of the divine action. The true reading is *sends*, not *shall send*. Since the time of the action is clearly future this must be taken as the prophetic present, giving us the note of greater certainty. *Energeian planes*, rendered *strong delusion*, is an expression difficult to translate. As we saw on verse 9, *energeia* denotes power in action, so that the expression indicates not merely a passive acquiescence in wrong-doing, but an active forwarding of evil. It is a solemn thought that when men begin by rejecting the good they inevitably end by forwarding evil. The upshot of this is seen in the final statement *that they should believe a lie* (there is an article here; it is really *the lie*). The lie is over against the truth in verse 10, and stands for that which Satan would have men believe, more particularly with regard to the *lawless one*. This is *the lie*. But men who reject the gospel of God are bound to end by accepting evil as true. Thereby God uses Satan as the means of punishing them."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready: Living In Light Of the Second Coming* (Victor Books, 1979), p. 3.

²Doug Clark, a popular prophesy writer, says, “It is such a marvelous comfort to Christians to know that Jesus Christ is coming and that He will snatch us up and out of this mundane sphere of living.” John Darby had made the same point as long ago as 1840: “Let us remember one thing . . . we Christians are sheltered from the approaching storm.” As cited by Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Harvard, 1992), p. 299.

³F. F. Bruce points out that Paul’s language is difficult to reconcile with a pretribulational rapture. “With this understanding of *episunagōgēs* (gathering together) and with the occurrence of *Parousia* (coming) (as in 1 Thess. 4:15), it is difficult to suppose that the *Day of the Lord* in this section (v. 2) belongs to a different time from that in view in 1 Thess. 4:13-18, as is held by the Darbyite school of dispensationalism. It is remarkable, nevertheless that (according to Kelly, *Rapture*, 5-8), J. N. Darby recorded that it was 2 Thess. 2:1, 2 which, about 1830, ‘made me understand the rapture of the saints before – perhaps a considerable time before – the Day of the Lord (that is, before the judgment of the living).’” *1 & 2 Thessalonians: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1982), p. 163.

⁴A number of prominent dispensationalists have, in a desperate attempt to find a text for a pretribulational rapture, sought to make *apostasia* mean “a departure” from the earth! Well-known radio Bible teacher J. Vernon McGee taught this, as did E. Schuyler English, the editor of the New Schofield Bible, and most recently H. Wayne House in “Apostasia in II Thess. 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture,” *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. T. Ice and T. Demy (Harvest House, 1995), Robert Gundry conclusively demonstrates that “both lexical and contextual considerations unite with unmistakable clarity to show that *he apostasia* does not represent the rapture, but the Antichrist’s insurrection against the Almighty.” *The Church and The Tribulation: A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationalism* (Zondervan, 1973), p. 118.

⁵As translated in Charles B. Williams’ *The New Testament In the Language of the People* (Moody, 1966), p. 455.

⁶D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Moody, 1971), p. 505.

⁷K. Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin: Uncovering The Truth About the Antichrist* (Baker, 2006), p. 119.

⁸R. V. E. Tasker, *The Epistle of Paul To The Thessalonians: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 134.