

# DOES 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1–3 EXCLUDE THE PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE?

*David A. Dean*

**T**HE APOSTLE PAUL HAD LEARNED of a false report and the response of his Thessalonian brethren to that report. His reply in 2 Thessalonians addressed their concerns.

The thesis of this article may be expressed in the following five points, with points 1 through 3 expressing evidence that is already widely recognized and accepted by proponents of all views. First, Paul had instructed the Thessalonians on endtime chronology during his stay in Thessalonica before he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and his teaching must have included the timing of the rapture with respect to the Second Coming as well as the events he mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12. In his response in 2 Thessalonians 2 he assumed their familiarity with that teaching.<sup>1</sup>

Second, a false report of some sort, purportedly from or through Paul, had led the Thessalonians to believe that the endtime sequence had begun, and that they were already in the Day of the Lord (vv. 1–2).

Third, the Thessalonians' problem was not that they had misunderstood Paul's teaching on the endtime sequence or had failed

---

David A Dean is Professor of Systematic Theology and Bible Exposition, Yan Fook Bible Institute, Hong Kong, Republic of China

<sup>1</sup> This point is agreed on by virtually all expositors. See Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 59; Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 107; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 231; Todd D. Stall, "Eschatology in the Thessalonian Letters," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 197; and Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 421.

to learn it. Paul was confident that they had learned and understood it (vv. 5–6, 15).

Fourth, the false report was plausible enough to the Thessalonians to raise their concerns that it might be true, though they obviously saw some dissonance between their expectations, their experience, and the report. Whatever endtime sequence Paul had taught them, nothing in their immediate circumstances was sufficient to render the false report completely implausible.<sup>2</sup>

Fifth, Paul's response in 2 Thessalonians contains sufficient information to correct the confusion of the Thessalonians. To suggest otherwise impugns the effectiveness and sufficiency of Scripture.

Because the fourth and fifth points have not been given sufficient attention in past discussions of 2 Thessalonians 2 and the timing of the rapture, this article examines these points and argues that only the pretribulational rapture view is compatible with the teaching of 2 Thessalonians 2.<sup>3</sup>

#### VIEWS ON THE DAY OF THE LORD AND THE RAPTURE

The much-disputed term ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου (“the day of the Lord”) appears in the New Testament in Acts 2:20 (citing Joel 2:31); 1 Thessalonians 5:2; and 2 Thessalonians 2:2.<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament the day of the Lord refers to special interventions of God in human history, generally involving divine judgment.<sup>5</sup> The eschatological

---

<sup>2</sup> This point is crucial. As will be shown, whatever chronology Paul had taught the Thessalonians, there was some conflict between the content of the false report and what the Thessalonians either had been taught or were observing in the world or both. The question here is, Which chronology makes the most sense of their response to the false report and Paul's response to their concerns?

<sup>3</sup> Pretribulationist Paul Feinberg has argued that if it can be shown that 2 Thessalonians 2 allows a pretribulational rapture, then other biblical passages are sufficient to establish it (“2 Thessalonians 2 and the Rapture,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy [Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995], 305). One may further argue, however, that 2 Thessalonians 2 does not merely allow pretribulationism, but strongly affirms it.

<sup>4</sup> Similar phrases appear in 1 Corinthians 5:5 and 2 Peter 3:10, but these do not figure significantly in the present discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Mayhue gives a helpful discussion of the Old Testament origins of the term, including a list of such uses (“The Apostle's Watchword: Day of the Lord,” in *New Testament Essays in Honor of Homer A. Kent Jr.*, ed. Gary T. Meadors [Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1991], 240). Regarding the use of the term “the Day of the Lord” in prophetic contexts, he concludes that “the prominent theme of every day of the Lord prophecy is God's judgment of sin” (*ibid.*, 241).

Day of the Lord is yet to occur. Related to it is the term ὀργή, “wrath,” used in 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9; and Revelation 6:16–17; 11:18; and 16:19. These passages refer to divine judgment and promise exemption from ὀργή for the church. This promise of exemption from wrath means that the rapture must occur before the Day of the Lord begins.<sup>6</sup>

Proponents of the pretribulational rapture usually argue that the Day of the Lord will commence immediately after the rapture, will include the seventieth week of Daniel (the seven-year tribulation), and will continue to the end of the millennium.<sup>7</sup> However, some pretribulation proponents allow that the Day of the Lord may commence at the midpoint of the seventieth week.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of the midtribulational rapture generally hold that the Day of the Lord will begin at the midpoint of the seventieth week.<sup>9</sup> Proponents of the pre-wrath rapture generally place the commencement of the Day of the Lord late in the second half of the seventieth week, viewing it as a brief period of intense divine wrath.<sup>10</sup> Proponents of the posttribulational rapture generally see the Day of the Lord as beginning at the end of the seventieth week and including

---

<sup>6</sup> John F Walvoord notes, “Virtually everyone agrees that the judgments related to the second coming are in some sense a part of the day of the Lord” (*The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation: A Biblical and Historical Study of Posttribulationism* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], 108) Walvoord says the beginning (the *terminus a quo*) of the Day of the Lord will be at the beginning of Daniel’s seventieth week (*The Thessalonian Epistles*, 81) Others, as will be shown, locate it differently, and this affects their views on the timing of the rapture

<sup>7</sup> John F Walvoord, “The Pretribulational Rapture,” in *Countdown to Armageddon*, ed Charles C Ryrie (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1999), 77

<sup>8</sup> Paul D Feinberg writes, “I think Gundry is probably right in arguing that the Day of the Lord does not begin with the Tribulation, although I would start the Day of the Lord about the middle of the week (cf Jer 30:7, Joel 2:1–11, Matt 24:15, 2 Thess 2:3–4)” (“The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, ed Gleason L Archer Jr [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 61) Feinberg is quick to observe, however, that “divine wrath may not be confined simply to the Day of the Lord” (*ibid*) See also Mayhue, “The Apostle’s Watchword: Day of the Lord,” 260, and Kenneth S Wuest, “The Rapture—Precisely When?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (January–March 1957): 64

<sup>9</sup> Midtribulationist Archer seems to place the Day of the Lord in the latter half of the seventieth week (Gleason L Archer Jr, ed, *Three Views on the Rapture*, 118)

<sup>10</sup> Marvin J Rosenthal divides the second half of the seventieth week into two parts The first he identifies as the Great Tribulation, which concludes with the sixth seal The second he identifies as the Day of the Lord, which includes the seventh seal and the seven trumpets He places the “pre-wrath rapture” at the junction point between these two periods (*The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church* [Nashville: Nelson, 1990], 60)

the millennium.<sup>11</sup> Rasmussen, proponent of a novel view he calls the “post-trib, pre-wrath rapture,” also places the start of the Day of the Lord at the end of the seventieth week.<sup>12</sup>

### EXPLORATION OF 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1–3

The contribution of 2 Thessalonians 2 to the rapture debate raises several questions. (1) To what does “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (v. 1) refer? (2) What is the chronology of the statements in verses 2–3? (3) What is the meaning of ἀποστασία in verse 3? (4) What is the nature and time of the revealing of “the man of lawlessness” in verse 3? (5) What is the referent of the “restrainer” in verses 6–7? Posttribulationists have traditionally held that 2 Thessalonians 2 supports their view, whereas pretribulationists obviously disagree.

The following is a suggested translation of these verses (with supplied words included in italics).

(1) Now we ask you, brothers, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, (2) in order that you should not quickly be shaken by your thoughts nor continue in a state of alarm, neither through a spirit nor through a word nor through a letter as if through us, as *if we had relayed to you a message stating* that the Day of the Lord had arrived: (3) *make sure that* no one deceives you by any means! For . . . unless the ἀποστασία should come first and after it the man of lawlessness should be revealed, the son of destruction. . . .

Seven aspects of this translation call for explanation. (1) An

---

<sup>11</sup> Robert H. Gundry holds to the “posttribulational beginning of the day of the Lord,” and concludes (as do many premillennialists) that it includes the millennium and the final judgment (*The Church and the Tribulation*, 89, 109). He bases this conclusion, in part, on an identification of the celestial portents of Joel 2:30–31 and the posttribulational celestial portents of Matthew 24:29 (*ibid.*, 95). However, a study of celestial portents suggests that they may occur at several points in the eschaton and are therefore not unique markers.

<sup>12</sup> By comparing Joel 2:30–31 and the sixth seal judgment of Revelation 6:12 Roland Rasmussen concludes that the Day of the Lord begins with the sixth seal, and is essentially equivalent to the millennium (*The Post-Trib, Pre-Wrath Rapture* [Canoga Park, CA: Post-Trib Research Center, 1996], 89–90). On the basis of the 2,300 days mentioned in Daniel 8, he places the second coming 1,040 days after the midpoint of the seventieth week, nearly three years into the millennium (*ibid.*, 195–215). Rasmussen’s posttribulation view is unusual in that he sees an extended gap between the rapture and the Second Coming. He argues that lack of such a gap and the effort to crowd too many events into the Second Coming proper (as exemplified by Gundry’s formulation) have been “an Achilles’ heel for historic posttribulationism” (*ibid.*, 251).

intentional effort has been made to render all four διὰ clauses in verse 2 in a consistent manner, since διὰ with the genitive usually expresses means or agency (“through”).<sup>13</sup> (2) The added words “as if we had relayed to you a message stating” are supplied to clarify that the false report (however it was delivered) was believed by the Thessalonians to have come through the agency of Paul and thus with his approval. These words also highlight Paul’s eagerness to distance himself from any such claim.<sup>14</sup> (3) The anacoluthon [. . .] (an omitted apodosis of the third-class conditional statement in v. 3) has been left unspecified and will be considered below.<sup>15</sup> (4) The term ἀποστασία (usually transliterated “apostasy”) is left untranslated to allow the range of proposed referents for this much-disputed term to be examined. (5) Although the πρῶτον καὶ in verse 3 is usually translated simply “first, and,” the translation “first and after it” is preferable for grammatical reasons.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that ἀποστασία will occur *before* the “revealing” of the man of lawlessness. The phrase “make sure that” (or “see to it that”) is supplied at the beginning of verse 3 to render the grammar complete.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 741 William W. Combs offers a specific discussion of the four phrases in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 (“Is *Apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 3 [1998]: 68–69) Gordon D. Fee offers an extended discussion of the phrase ὡς δι’ ἡμῶν, concluding that its use suggests that Paul’s primary concern is that the Thessalonians know that he is not the source of the false teaching (“Pneuma and Eschatology in 2 Thessalonians 2 1–2: A Proposal about ‘Testing the Prophets’ and the Purpose of 2 Thessalonians,” in *Tell the Mystery: Essays on New Testament Eschatology in Honor of Robert H. Gundry*, ed. Thomas E. Schmidt and Moises Silva, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series [Sheffield: JSOT, 1994], 203–7)

<sup>14</sup> F. F. Bruce notes that the unusual ὡς ὅτι may be intended “to impart a subjective flavor to the clause before it” (*1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1982], 165). This is fitting with his use of the subjunctive ἐξαπατήσῃ in verse 3, by which Paul sought to express his doubt that the Thessalonians could really be deceived.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the grammatical structure of the conditional sentence see Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 696

<sup>16</sup> Steve McAvoy cites an impressive array of standard Greek reference works that support the common use of πρῶτον as designating the prior member of a series, and he argues that there is little reason to translate the term here with the sense of “before the Day of the Lord” He cites Matthew 12.29 and Romans 15:24 as supporting examples (“The Day of the Lord and Certain So-Called ‘Precursors’”, <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/McAvoy-TheDayOfTheLordAndCer.pdf> [accessed April 2010]). Earl J. Richard comes to similar conclusions (*First and Second Thessalonians*, Sacra Pagina [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995], 324)

<sup>17</sup> Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 166.

## VERSE 1

Almost all expositors agree that the “gathering” (ἐπισυναγωγῆς) refers to the rapture. Posttribulationists typically invoke the Granville Sharpe rule to argue that the two phrases τῆς παρουσίας (“coming” or “appearance”) τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν and ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς (“gathering”) ἐπ’ αὐτὸν refer to a single event, though this is disputed.<sup>18</sup> They argue that since Paul equated these two events, and the term παρουσία is a technical term for the Second Coming, this establishes the posttribulational position. However, παρουσία is not necessarily a technical term for the Second Coming.<sup>19</sup> In fact Paul used the same term in verse 9 in reference to the “coming” of the lawless one, so that the term does not always refer to physical arrival.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the claim that the παρουσία and the gathering are one event does not support posttribulationalism, nor does it eliminate it. All views of the rapture can be reconciled with either position, if one places no emphasis on the order of the terms.<sup>21</sup> But if one sees significance in the word order, the terms favor the pretribulational view. Had Paul been referring in verse 1 to a combined posttribulational Second Coming/rapture, one would expect the order of the

---

<sup>18</sup> David J. Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 122. See also Ronald Arthur Ward, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1973), 153. Combs, however, argues that the phrase in question does not meet the Granville Sharp criteria because the nouns are impersonal. He cites the work of Wallace, whose criteria when applied to the phrase at hand suggest either (a) “distinct entities, though united (e.g., ‘truth and love’),” or (b) “second group a subset of first (e.g., ‘the day and hour of his coming’)” (“Is *Apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?” 66; cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 286–90).

<sup>19</sup> While it is often claimed that παρουσία is a synonym for the Second Coming, to make such a claim in view of its use in passages like 1 Thessalonians 4:15 (where it clearly refers to the rapture) and 2 Thessalonians 2:8 (where it clearly refers to the Second Coming) is to make a circular argument based on a posttribulational presupposition. John F. Walvoord notes that παρουσία is not a technical term. It is used of the coming of Paul’s friends (1 Cor. 16:17), Titus (7:6–7), Paul himself (Phil. 1:26), the “lawless one” (2 Thess. 2:9), and the day of God (2 Pet. 3:12). The term is sometimes used of the rapture and sometimes of the Second Coming. Thus pretribulationists should not use the term in support of their position (*The Rapture Question* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957], 155–56).

<sup>20</sup> Clearly the “lawless one” will be a human being who will have been physically present on the earth for decades before the event described in verse 9.

<sup>21</sup> If the “coming” and the “gathering” are a single event, they could refer either to (a) the rapture alone (any rapture view), or (b) the rapture and the Second Coming. If they are separate events, they could be a merism describing the Day of the Lord or they could simply be Paul’s way of identifying the topic that involves the rapture and the Second Coming, namely, the eschaton.

phrases to be the reverse of Paul's order.<sup>22</sup> The word order ("coming" and "gathering together") in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 states that the Lord will "descend" (καταβαίνω; cf. παρουσία) and then the saints on earth will be "caught up . . . to meet the Lord in the air" (ἀρπάζω; cf. ἐπισυναγωγῆς).<sup>23</sup> Many posttribulationists speak of the rapture as being analogous to the turning out of a city's populace to meet and then escort into town an important dignitary or returning hero. However, this too would mean that the order would be opposite the order in 2 Thessalonians 2:1.<sup>24</sup> Further a harmonization of John 14:1–3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:17 argues against a momentary, unified rapture/Second Coming because of the need for the saints transformed in the rapture to return with Christ to the dwellings He had prepared for them in "My Father's house" (John 14:2).

#### VERSE 2

Paul did not state the object of his request in verse 1 (Ἐρωτῶμεν . . . ὑμᾶς, "we ask you") until verse 3, but his purpose in making that request is "that you should not quickly be shaken by your thoughts nor continue in a state of alarm" (v. 2). Gundry has sought to render ταχέως σαλευθῆναι ("quickly shaken") as "excitement" and "wild anticipation," a characterization that is necessary to uphold his position.<sup>25</sup> However, almost all expositors agree not that the Thes-

<sup>22</sup> Gundry notes the order, but he either fails to see this argument or he deliberately avoids commenting on it (*The Church and the Tribulation*, 113–14)

<sup>23</sup> Richard L. Mayhue, a pretribulationist, writes, "In 2 Thess 2 1, the Parousia and the gathering together refer to different aspects of the same event. It pictures perfectly Christ's descent (1 Thess 4 15–16) and the believers' ascent (1 Thess 4 16–17) both parts of which comprise the rapture (1 Thess 4 17, 1 Cor 15 51–52)" ("Why a Pretribulation Rapture?" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 13 [2002] 254) Gary W. Demarest, not a pretribulationist, notes the same connections with 1 Thessalonians 4, but does not comment on the order of the terms (*1, 2 Thessalonians, 1, 2 Timothy, Communicator's Commentary* [Waco, TX: Word, 1984], 118)

<sup>24</sup> See T. Van McClain, "The Pretribulation Rapture: A Doubtful Doctrine," in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 243–44. McClain then writes, "Matthew 25:6 speaks of virgins going out to meet the bridegroom and escorting him to the wedding" (*ibid.*, 244). However, that verse actually contradicts McClain's conclusion, because the virgins do not return to their original place, they accompany the bridegroom to the site of the wedding, namely, the Father's house.

<sup>25</sup> Gundry initially argues that joy and sorrow are "false alternatives," preferring the neutral term "agitation" to characterize the Thessalonians' state (*The Church and the Tribulation*, 114). But a few pages later Gundry chooses one of the "false alternatives": "Thus it was not sorrow over a missed rapture which agitated the Thessalonians, but wild anticipation of an immediate return of Christ" (*ibid.*, 121). Posttribulationist Douglas J. Moo favors "agitated and unsettled—abandoning their

salonians were excited, but that they were disturbed, upset, and fearful.<sup>26</sup> The cause of their consternation was the contents of a communication, supposedly sent to them through Paul.

Several things are clear regarding verse 2. First, Paul did not personally deliver the communication to the Thessalonians. Second, Paul does not seem to have known how the communication reached the Thessalonians.<sup>27</sup> Third, the communication was either (a) pseudepigraphal in that it claimed to have originated with Paul but did not, or (b) the communication or its final deliverers claimed that it had Paul's endorsement because it had passed through his hands.<sup>28</sup> Fourth, Paul was eager to deny any part in the communication and to show that he rejected its contents as false.

The false reports said that "the Day of the Lord has arrived." A few expositors have argued that ἐνέστηκεν should be rendered "at hand, near but not yet here."<sup>29</sup> However, strong evidence and the

---

normal common sense and daily pursuits in nervous excitement over the nearness of the end" ("The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture*, 188).

<sup>26</sup> See Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 122; Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 126; Linda McKinnish Bridges, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 231; Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 163; and Combs, "Is *Apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?" 68. Danker says θροέομαι in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 means "disturbed or frightened" (Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 460). J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida state that the use of θροέομαι in 2 Thessalonians means being "in a state of fear associated with surprise" (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2d ed. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1988], 1:317). The word is used elsewhere only in Matthew 24:6 and Mark 13:7, and in both of those verses there is little doubt that it bears the negative connotation of "fear" or "being troubled."

<sup>27</sup> Charles A. Wanamaker notes, "This [the phrase 'as if from us'] implies that Paul either believed or considered it possible that the Thessalonians' misunderstanding was *alleged* to be based on something prophesied, spoken, or written by himself or one of his colleagues" (*The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 239, italics his).

<sup>28</sup> Present purposes do not require that the possible meanings of "spirit" and "word" be explored at length. The known presence of ecstatic cults in the area raises the possibility that someone in the Thessalonian church (or perhaps a visitor) had delivered some kind of claimed supernatural revelation allegedly from Paul, possibly by "channeling" (to borrow a modern term) Paul's spirit. Another possible referent for "word" is that "apocalyptic preachers or teachers infiltrated the community with new teachings" (Bridges, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 232–33).

<sup>29</sup> A. M. G. Stephanson claims that the translation "has arrived" is a modern novelty introduced in the nineteenth century and propagated through the influence of

opinion of the great majority of expositors favor the present sense of the false report.<sup>30</sup> Paul then sought to refute that claim.

### VERSE 3

This verse opens with Paul's request, "Let no one deceive you by any means!" (author's translation). Here Paul noted that the false communication was an intentional deception, for the Day of the Lord had not begun.<sup>31</sup> Paul then gave reasons why the Day of the Lord could not have begun.

Two translational challenges arise here. First, Paul's primary statement of proof is an incomplete conditional sentence. One's conclusions regarding Paul's argument will be affected by how one fills this gap. Second, the significance of the chronological constraints stated by Paul (through his use of *πρῶτον*, "first") must be discerned.

Regarding the first issue, most modern translations supply a phrase such as "it [i.e., the Day of the Lord] will not come."<sup>32</sup> However, such a supplied apodosis may prejudice one's understanding of the passage. This writer suggests that phrases such as the following should also be considered: "that day cannot be present [or 'have begun']," or "no one could be sure that the Day of the Lord has arrived [or 'has begun']."

The first allows for the possibility that Paul was speaking of

---

the RSV translation ("On the Meaning of *ἐνέστηκεν ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου* in 2 Thessalonians 2,2," in *Studia Evangelica*, ed. F. L. Cross [Berlin: Academie, 1968]).

<sup>30</sup> Both posttribulationists and pretribulationists favor the "has arrived" or "is present" meaning of *ἐνέστηκεν*. Gundry favors "has arrived" based on its use in the New Testament. He also argues that "is imminent" is possible, noting further that the latter meaning would not be fatal for either the posttribulationist view or the pretribulationist view (*The Church and the Tribulation*, 21–22, 112). Also Walvoord understands the term to mean presence (*The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, 124). See also Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 325; and G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 199–200.

<sup>31</sup> One is tempted to speculate that the false communication may have been brought by individuals of the sort who often dogged Paul's heels and attempted to undermine his ministry after his departure, as in the case of the "Judaizers" in Galatia. These individuals could have infiltrated the church at Thessalonica, claiming to be followers of Paul, and then foisted the phony communication by any of the means cited by Paul. Another possibility is that demonic forces used a member or members of the Thessalonian church as agents in the delivery of a "word" or "spirit" of prophecy. Whatever means was used, deception was the purpose.

<sup>32</sup> This is the reading of the NASB. The ASV, NET, NIV, and NKJV are similar. James Everett Frame offers a phrase whose import is similar: "the Day of the Lord will not be present" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1988], 243).

events that will occur during the Day of the Lord. The latter recognizes the likelihood that Paul wished to introduce evidential grounds for claiming that the Day of the Lord was present.

Reasons for suggesting these kinds of apodoses are as follows. First, the false communication (and likely those who had delivered it) claimed that the Day of the Lord was already under way. Such knowledge must necessarily be based either on (a) evidence or (b) divine revelation, with the latter either received directly by someone in the Thessalonian church or through Paul or another God-approved spokesman. Coming from an apostle, Paul's clear denial of the presence of the Day of the Lord in verses 2–3 was sufficient to show that any such claimed revelation was false. Having thus disposed of the claim of divine revelation that the Day of the Lord was present, one would expect Paul to direct his response to the question of evidence available to the Thessalonians. The second proposed apodosis does this specifically. Admittedly the normally supplied apodosis ("that day will not come") also addresses the question of evidence, but the way in which it is stated prejudices the discussion unfairly in favor of the posttribulational view.

To see this, the chronological constraints must be considered. If *πρῶτον* is translated simply "first" (as is commonly done) after the ordinarily supplied apodosis "that Day will not come," one receives the impression that Paul was saying that the Day of the Lord must be preceded by both the ἀποστασία and the revealing of the man of lawlessness. This is exactly the argument that Gundry makes, and that argument is vital to his effort to move the Day of the Lord as late as possible in order to support a posttribulational rapture.<sup>33</sup> However, as noted earlier, *πρῶτον* expresses only the sequence of the ἀποστασία and the revealing. Nothing in Paul's words requires that these two events must precede the beginning of the Day of the Lord. It is possible that they are *part of* the Day of the Lord.

What is meant by the ἀποστασία and the "revealing of the man of lawlessness"? The term ἀποστασία has generally been understood in one of four ways.<sup>34</sup> (1) An appositive that refers to the man of lawlessness himself.<sup>35</sup> (2) A "falling away" from the truth, either

---

<sup>33</sup> Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> See Combs, "Is *Apostasia* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?" 72–73; and H. Wayne House, "Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?" in *The Return: Understanding Christ's Second Coming and the End Times*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 149–53.

<sup>35</sup> In this view only one event is in view: the "revealing of the man of lawlessness."

by the professing Christian church rejecting the historic Christian faith or Jews rejecting the God of their fathers or non-Christians denying any claims of a superior being and instead proclaiming their own absolute supremacy. A wide range of *termini a quo* for these hypotheses is possible, reaching even before the opening of the seventieth week.<sup>36</sup> (3) An active rebellion against God and the accompanying growth of ungodliness in the world at large. (4) The physical departure of the church in the rapture. Because this fourth view is widely rejected, it is not discussed here.<sup>37</sup>

The ἀποκαλυφθῆ ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας (the “revealing of the man of lawlessness,” i.e., the Antichrist)<sup>38</sup> has been explained in a number of ways. (a) The appearing of the Antichrist as a world figure before the beginning of the seventieth week.<sup>39</sup> (b) The signing of the covenant by the Antichrist (Dan. 9:27).<sup>40</sup> (c) The emerging of the Antichrist as a well-known world figure sometime during the first half of Daniel’s seventieth week.<sup>41</sup> (d) The event in which the Antichrist will desecrate the temple at the midpoint of the seventieth week (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Since the New Testament speaks of a number of events or movements that could be characterized as turnings away from the truth (Matt. 24:12; 2 Thess. 2:10–12; 2 Tim. 3:1–7, 4:3–4; Rev. 17, etc.) one could find support for almost any point in time as the *terminus a quo* for this understanding of the term ἀποστασία.

<sup>37</sup> Some who support this view are E. Schuyler English, *Rethinking the Rapture* (Travelers Rest, SC: Southern Bible Book House, 1954), 68–69; House, “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?”; Wuest, “The Rapture—Precisely When?” 65–67; John Sweigert, “Is There a Departure in 2 Thessalonians 2:3?” *Conservative Theological Journal* 5 (2001): 191–204; and Gordon R. Lewis, “Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (April–June 1968): 217–18. Vigorous refutations are offered by Combs, “Is Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 a Reference to the Rapture?” and Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 115–18.

<sup>38</sup> The term “Antichrist” refers to the “man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:3, 8), the “beast from the sea” (Rev. 13:1), the “little horn” (Dan. 7:8), and others.

<sup>39</sup> Walvoord seems to hold this position (“The Pretribulation Rapture,” 77).

<sup>40</sup> Pretribulationist Renald Showers argues that since (a) Scripture states that the man of lawlessness will perform a public act in the signing of the covenant, and (b) since Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3 that the rapture will precede his revealing, one must conclude that the revealing of the Antichrist occurs at the signing of the covenant (*Maranatha, Our Lord, Come!* [Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1995], 65–66).

<sup>41</sup> Robert L. Thomas, a pretribulationist, seems to allow for this view (“2 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978], 322).

<sup>42</sup> See Moo, “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” 189; H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the First and Second Epistles of Thessalonians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1947), 93–94; and William Hendriksen, *I and II Thessalonians*,

What rapture view (or views) must Paul have taught the Thessalonians for them to react as they did to the report that the Day of the Lord had begun, that is, to have thought it sufficiently plausible not to dismiss it immediately?<sup>43</sup> Stated negatively, what rapture views are eliminated by the fact that the Thessalonians considered the report plausible? These questions can be answered by examining each view on the rapture in relation to the Day of the Lord.

### THE POSTTRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE VIEW

According to the posttribulational rapture view the false report said that the Day of the Lord had arrived, that the Day of the Lord follows the Second Coming, and that the rapture and the Second Coming are a single event. However, the Thessalonians would have immediately known that any claim that the Day of the Lord had arrived must be false, for several reasons. First, Christ had not returned (cf. Matt. 24:26–30), and yet the false report claimed that the Thessalonians were already in the Day of the Lord, which follows the Second Coming. Second, since the rapture must have occurred, the Thessalonians would have to conclude that they had been left behind. Third, Daniel's seventieth week had had no time to transpire. Fourth, the desecration of the temple at the middle of the Tribulation and the persecutions that will follow it had not occurred. Fifth, the supernatural judgments that will characterize at least the final days of the seventieth week had not been observed by the Thessalonians.<sup>44</sup> These observations suggest it is impossible that the Thessalonians would have given any credence to a report

---

New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 179. Gundry is less clear on the exact identity of the revealing, but he does place both the ἀποστασία and the revealing of the man of lawlessness within the seventieth week (Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 119). The revealing cannot be any later than the midpoint of the seventieth week, since the temple desecration of Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:15; and 2 Thessalonians 2:4 is an unmistakably public event involving the Antichrist.

<sup>43</sup> Mayhue asks a similar question ("Why a Pretribulation Rapture?" 256).

<sup>44</sup> Gundry himself notes that Paul had taught the Thessalonians the "tribulational signs," though Gundry does not consider them to be God's wrath (ibid., 107). By Gundry's own observation, the generation that will experience the posttribulational rapture *must* live through the Tribulation. This admission is devastating to the posttribulational argument that the Thessalonians could have believed that they were either in, or about to enter, a posttribulational Day of the Lord without having experienced the unfolding of the latter part of the Tribulation.

that a post–Second Coming Day of the Lord had arrived.<sup>45</sup>

The false report requires that the rapture and the Second Coming had already occurred, but this is incompatible with Gundry's view that the Thessalonians were in "wild anticipation of an immediate return of Christ." Perhaps this is why Gundry later raised the possibility that the imminent view is correct.<sup>46</sup>

Posttribulationists may object that the Thessalonians were simply too confused to think clearly and that it is unfair to eliminate the posttribulational view on the hypothesis that they would see the inconsistency of the report with the posttribulational scheme that Paul had taught them. However, one may ask, "How foolish must one think the Thessalonians were?" The posttribulational view requires that the Thessalonians were foolish enough to overlook the plethora of difficulties enumerated above, yet astute enough to apply Paul's extensive teaching on the posttribulational timeline to the false report and conclude that "the rapture is near!"—a conclusion which, as shown, does not even follow from the premises. This is surely special pleading of a high order.

#### THE PRE-WRATH RAPTURE VIEW

According to this view the Day of the Lord will precede the Second Coming and will commence somewhere late within the second half of Daniel's seventieth week. The pre-wrath rapture marks the beginning of the Day of the Lord, which will include the seventh seal judgment and the seven trumpet judgments. (The seven bowl judgments, according to Rosenthal, will follow the Second Coming.<sup>47</sup>) All except the first of the arguments given above against the posttribulational view also argue against the pre-wrath rapture view. A retreat to the "imminence" view does not remove these difficulties.

---

<sup>45</sup> Gundry anticipated this line of argument, but he did not answer it (*The Church and the Tribulation*, 120). Gundry's own position requires either (a) that the Thessalonians believed they had failed to notice all the events of the Tribulation or (b) that they believed they had missed *both* the Second Coming *and* the rapture *and* all of the events of the Tribulation that will precede them. Both of these options (one of which Gundry must take) "border on absurdity."

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 122

<sup>47</sup> See John A. McLean, "Another Look at Rosenthal's 'Pre-Wrath Rapture,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (October–December 1991): 388.

### THE MIDTRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE VIEW

According to this view the Day of the Lord will begin at the midpoint of the seventieth week, coincident with the rapture itself and the desecration of the temple.<sup>48</sup> If Paul had taught the Thessalonians such a view, and they had received a report claiming that they were already in the Day of the Lord, again it is apparent that such a claim could not be taken seriously. They would readily reject such a claim for several reasons. (1) No such period as the three-and-a-half-year “beginning of sorrows” had passed them, nor had they heard of an influential world ruler or his covenant bringing peace to the world. (2) The calamities of the first half of the seventieth week (Matt. 24:5–8) had not occurred.<sup>49</sup> (3) The desecration of the temple and the self-elevation of the Antichrist had not occurred. (4) The rapture itself had not occurred, but yet it must have, if ἐνέστηκεν means “presence.”

### THE PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE VIEW

According to the pretribulational rapture view the Day of the Lord will begin either at the start of the seventieth week or at its midpoint. The outpouring of God’s wrath will begin sometime during the “beginning of sorrows” (Matt. 24:8) with the very first seal judgments, but nothing in those initial four seals (war, turmoil, famine, and widespread death) could be known with certainty (from evidence available to those dwelling on the earth) to be of supernatural origin.<sup>50</sup> The “covenant with many” of Daniel 9:27 will signal the beginning of the seventieth week, and the rapture

---

<sup>48</sup> Interestingly Archer, a proponent of the midtribulational view, uses many of the same arguments offered in support of the pretribulational view and against the posttribulational view: (1) imminence of the rapture, (2) difficulty of reconciling the sequence of events in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, (3) the New Testament emphasis on the deliverance of the church from God’s wrath, (4) the explanation of the white-clad saints who will accompany Christ in Revelation 19, and (5) the problem of populating the millennium (Gleason L. Archer Jr., “The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, 116). Archer argues strongly that Revelation 3:10 requires that the church “will be rescued from a period of great testing and trial that is going to come upon the world as a whole. But upon post-tribulational presuppositions there could be no such differentiation at all; what comes upon the world in general will have to come upon the church, which is living in the world” (ibid., 118).

<sup>49</sup> Many expositors view the calamities of Matthew 24:5–8 as preceding the “abomination of desolation” in Matthew 24:15 and 2 Thessalonians 2:4.

<sup>50</sup> As many have noted, the similarities of the calamities recorded in Matthew 24:6–8 and Revelation 6:1–8 are striking.

will either coincide with this event or will precede it by a short time.

If Paul had taught the Thessalonians a pretribulational rapture and they had received a false report claiming that the Day of the Lord had arrived, how would they evaluate the report? Was there anything in what Paul had taught them (aside from their own nonparticipation in the pretribulational rapture itself) that could show that the report was false? The answer is “no.” They would have just entered the early days of the seventieth week, days that would not be visibly different from preceding days, except for the absence of the church.<sup>51</sup> If the Antichrist’s signing of the covenant with Israel will occur immediately after the rapture, nothing requires that that signing must be made public immediately, and even if it were, the slowness of communication in the first century would have made it possible for the Thessalonians to believe that the covenant had already been signed without their knowledge. If the signing of the covenant were delayed for a short while after the rapture (as Walvoord suspects), this would make it even harder for the Thessalonians to reject the conclusion that the rapture was past. The first half of the seventieth week will be characterized by a sense of “peace and safety” (1 Thess. 5:3), not in the sense of the absence of physical calamities but in the sense of the political order that will be promised by the signing of the covenant. Therefore in pretribulationalism nothing in the experience of the Thessalonians or observable to them (except for the fact that they were still on earth and had not been raptured), offered them any certain means of rejecting a report that the Day of the Lord had already begun. Aside from the missed rapture, the report was plausible. This fact separates the pretribulational view from all the others.

But the difficulty of the “missed rapture” remains, and pretribulationists cannot retreat to the “imminence” view of ἐνέστηκεν to escape this difficulty.<sup>52</sup> This is in fact a strength of the pretribulational view, as several lines of argument show.

---

<sup>51</sup> John F. Walvoord, who says the Day of the Lord and the seventieth week start at the same time, writes, “The opening hours of the day of the Lord do not contain great events. Gradually the major events of the day of the Lord unfold, climaxing in the terrible judgments with which the great tribulation is brought to a conclusion” (“Posttribulationism Today, Part IX: The Rapture and the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134 [January–March 1977]: 12). One should keep in mind here that Walvoord uses the terms “great tribulation” and “seventieth week” interchangeably.

<sup>52</sup> If the Thessalonians had thought that the Day of the Lord equaled the seventieth week and that the rapture preceded it, a report that the Day of the Lord was imminent but not present would have caused them jubilation, not consternation.

lational view, as several lines of argument show.

First, the idea that they had “missed the rapture” and been “left behind” was not nearly so implausible for the Thessalonians as it may seem to people today. The Thessalonians were a relatively isolated group of believers in a relatively small city living in a time of no mass communication. Furthermore at this early stage in the history of the church the possibility that all living Christians (a small group of people) might have “disappeared” without that event causing an immediate uproar and being widely reported is plausible and even likely. Thus the idea that the Thessalonians might have heard the false report, and believing it to be true, had drawn the conclusion that they had been judged by God as unworthy and so had been left behind is not at all implausible.

Second, it is possible the Thessalonians thought they had missed the rapture because they were not born again. Third, the letter bears evidence that Paul recognized this possibility, and so he took pains to reassure the Thessalonians that they were in fact beloved and approved by God and truly His. Paul’s entire line of argument in chapter 1 evidences that very purpose, and he returned to the same theme in 2:13-17.<sup>53</sup>

### THE QUESTION OF THE THESSALONIANS’ CONFUSION

Virtually every writer on 2 Thessalonians 2 has grappled with the nature of the Thessalonians’ confusion. Both logic and the clear statements of the text show that something did not “add up” for them. This challenge of understanding their theological quandary leaves room for wide speculation. This in turn provides almost unlimited freedom to justify any particular rapture view simply by hypothesizing a set of wrong ideas and then imputing that thinking to the Thessalonians.

Gundry is an example of this strategy. He attributes three errors of thinking to the Thessalonians.

First, they erroneously thought that the day of the Lord will include the Tribulation. . . . Second, the Thessalonians erroneously thought that they had entered the Tribulation. . . . Third, the Thessalonians

---

<sup>53</sup> The argument of chapter 1 follows three lines. (1) In verses 3-5 Paul stated that he thanked God for the Thessalonians “and rightly so” (καθὼς ἄξιόν ἐστιν), and he boasted of their patience and faithful endurance in persecution and tribulation which was “manifest evidence” (ἔνδειγμα) of the certainty of their salvation. (2) Paul stated that the Thessalonians were among those who will receive relief, and not among those who will be destroyed as a result of Christ’s return (vv. 6-7). (3) Paul stated plainly that the Thessalonians did in fact believe the gospel (v. 10).

erroneously concluded that Christ's coming lay in the immediate future, with resultant cessation of work, fanatical excitement, and disorder. Thus, it was not sorrow over a missed rapture which agitated the Thessalonians, but wild anticipation of an immediate return of Christ.<sup>54</sup>

The second of these alleged errors is plausible.<sup>55</sup> But the first and the third are pure begging. Regarding the first, Gundry is prejudicing the case by imputing to the Thessalonians what he believes to be an error of the pretribulational view. If the Thessalonians thought that the Day of the Lord would include the Tribulation, the likely reason is that Paul had taught them so. Many have noted that Paul never undertook to correct their concept of that sequence.<sup>56</sup> Gundry himself has taken pains to argue that Paul had fully taught the Thessalonians the endtime sequence, and it is disingenuous here to make a plea to the opposite effect.<sup>57</sup> Regarding the third error imputed by Gundry to the Thessalonians, as already noted, the "wild anticipation of an immediate return of Christ" cannot be defended exegetically, and Gundry cannot hold this position unless he retreats to the imminence understanding of the false report, and accepts the difficulties that attend that retreat.

Which rapture view, then, best explains that the Thessalonians considered the false report plausible? The answer is clear. The posttribulational, pre-wrath, and midtribulational views all require the belief that the Thessalonians were such poor thinkers that they could overlook the obvious nonoccurrence of momentous world-

---

<sup>54</sup> Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 121

<sup>55</sup> As many have noted, the persecutions and hardships endured by the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 1:4–5) were not trivial, and it is conceivable that they considered them as characteristic of the Tribulation period. This point, however, supports the pretribulational view at least as much as it does the posttribulational view.

<sup>56</sup> See Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Charles C. Ryrie et al. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 208. Frame observes that Paul "selects from the whole of his previous oral teaching concerning times and seasons only such elements as serve to prove that the assertion (v. 2) is mistaken" and then "appeal[s], with perhaps a trace of impatience at their forgetfulness, to the memory of the readers to complete the picture (v. 5)" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, 249). Paul would hardly do so if he (a) had not taught them the endtime sequence and (b) had been confident that they had learned and retained that teaching.

<sup>57</sup> If, as Gundry speculates, they thought that the Day of the Lord would include the Tribulation and this was false, one would expect Paul to perceive this major error and correct it. Instead Gundry suggests that he was able to see their error but somehow Paul did not, or that if he did, Paul chose not to correct it and without apparent reason.

impacting events and be duped into a panic by a report that would appear ludicrous without such egregious oversight. To suggest that the Thessalonians were so foolish and yet would apply a single truth of the alleged scenarios (viz., that the rapture and the onset of the Day of the Lord are coincident) strains credulity, not to mention begging the question and insulting their memory.

If someone brought to premillennialists today a report saying, “The physical return of the Lord has already occurred,” or “The Lord will touch down on earth tomorrow,” or “The Day of the Lord is already under way,” how many would believe the report? One should not forget that the Thessalonians were taught their eschatology by the apostle Paul himself.

Only the pretribulational rapture view can explain all the data of 2 Thessalonians 2 without injecting errors of thinking into the minds of the Thessalonians. Admittedly the pretribulational view requires the conclusion that the Thessalonians thought they had been left behind at the rapture, but proponents of the other rapture views face the same difficulty.

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE REPORT THROUGH OR FROM PAUL

Proponents of all the rapture views must grapple with the problem of the report through or from Paul in verse 2. If the Day of the Lord had arrived, with the rapture having preceded it, how could Paul have sent such a report, since he would have departed in the rapture? Gundry raises this point in an effort to defeat the pretribulational position.<sup>58</sup> In fact this problem applies equally to all views except the posttribulational view, but unfortunately this fact has not been widely recognized. While the posttribulational view seeks to avoid this problem, the solution raises more problems than it solves.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand if the report was that the Day of the Lord was imminent but had not yet arrived, the problem of Paul’s presence is solved, but the problem of the upset state of mind of the Thessalonians is evident.

---

<sup>58</sup> Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 120.

<sup>59</sup> If the posttribulational view were correct, since the posttribulational rapture results in transformation of the saints but not translation to the Father’s house, Paul would still be on earth (though in a glorified state), and could conceivably send a report to the Thessalonians saying, “The Day of the Lord is here.” However, how could the Thessalonians (a) think that they were in the Day of the Lord, having missed the Second Coming and the rapture, (b) convince themselves that they had missed the seal and trumpet judgments, and (c) explain why the bowl judgments were not now occurring, as the posttribulational view requires?

Proponents of all the rapture views have no choice but to take the facts at face value. The Thessalonians received a report that was not from Paul, but they believed that it was either from him or had passed through his hands, and most importantly they believed that it had his approval. Paul did not know for certain how the report had come, but he did know what it claimed; further he knew how to disprove the report and he undertook to do so. The problem of the report through/from Paul can neither establish nor defeat any of the rapture views.

### WHY DID PAUL NOT CITE A PRETRIBULATIONAL RAPTURE?

If Paul had taught the pretribulational rapture, why did he not simply write to the Thessalonians, “The Day of the Lord cannot be here because the rapture has not happened yet?” Several answers, some already alluded to, may be noted.<sup>60</sup> First, if Paul had written, “You are not in the Day of the Lord because the rapture has not yet occurred,” this would not address the possibility that they feared that they had missed the rapture because they were unworthy.<sup>61</sup> This fear probably explains why Paul opened the letter with an unusually powerful expression of his confidence in their salvation. Second, Paul recognized that their problem was not a faulty chronological and theological understanding, but rather a failure to apply that understanding (and the evidence available to them) to the question before them.

The report claimed, “The Day of the Lord is present.” *But it did not claim that the rapture had already occurred.* This must be kept in mind. If the Thessalonians concluded from this report that they had missed the rapture, this was because of their own thinking, not the claim of the false report.

As noted earlier, while most pretribulationists believe that the Day of the Lord will begin when the seventieth week begins, several raise the possibility that the Day of the Lord will include only the second half of the seventieth week.

If Paul had taught the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord will begin soon after the rapture when the seventieth week will

---

<sup>60</sup> Some might answer, “He did—in referring to the ἀποστασία, namely, the rapture.” But most writers reject the view that ἀποστασία refers to the rapture.

<sup>61</sup> This writer of course recognizes that the mere fact that Paul wrote in response to the Thessalonian’s plight is itself evidence that the rapture had not occurred. He did not simply send them a signed note saying, “The fact that I’m still here shows that the rapture has not yet occurred.”

begin, his response is fully cogent. If the ἀποστασία, a defection from the truth, preceded the seventieth week, and the man of lawlessness will be revealed when he signs a covenant with Israel, then Paul was saying, “The Day of the Lord has not begun because both of these must occur first.” This is the most common pretribulational view.

However, if the ἀποστασία, some defection from the truth, will occur before or soon after the rapture, and the man of sin will be a well-known figure sometime in the first half of the seventieth week after he has signed the covenant, Paul would have responded, “If we were in the Day of the Lord, you would now be aware of the ἀποστασία and the man of lawlessness would be a known figure.” Longenecker takes exactly this approach.<sup>62</sup>

A third approach would be to take the ἀποστασία and the revealing of the man of lawlessness as events that will coincide with the beginning of the seventieth week, in which case Paul’s argument would be, “Since these will happen immediately at the beginning of the Day of the Lord, and they have not occurred, we cannot be in the Day of the Lord.” A number of variations of this general strategy, fully reconcilable with the text of 2 Thessalonians 2, are possible.<sup>63</sup>

But if the Day of the Lord will begin at the midpoint of the seventieth week, Paul’s response is equally cogent, and perhaps more obvious. Here Paul’s point was, “You cannot possibly have passed the midpoint of the Tribulation because the ἀποστασία has not occurred, and the man of lawlessness has not been revealed.” In this view a wide range of meanings for both the ἀποστασία and the revealing are easily accommodated. This understanding of the Day of the Lord does not seem to raise significant difficulties with 1 Thessalonians 5, and may even simplify its interpretation.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Richard N. Longenecker writes of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, “Its argument is essentially negative: that if the Day of the Lord had already come, Thessalonian Christians would be able by hindsight to identify ‘the apostasy’ and ‘the man of lawlessness’ (vv. 3–4) . . . but since they can’t, it hasn’t!” (“The Nature of Paul’s Early Eschatology,” *New Testament Studies* 31 [1985]: 93).

<sup>63</sup> For example William K. Harrison suggests the unusual view that the ἀποστασία is the sudden total absence of believers on the earth immediately following the rapture, and since that has not occurred, the Day of the Lord is not present (“The Time of the Rapture as Indicated in Certain Scriptures (Part II),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115 [January–March 1958]: 25).

<sup>64</sup> If the Day of the Lord will begin at the midpoint of the seventieth week, Paul’s statement in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 (“While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape”) becomes even more intelligible. “Peace and safety” refers to the time of political order created during the first half of the seventieth

## CONCLUSION

Advocates of the various rapture views often support their views by noting that the rapture precedes the onset of God's wrath in the Day of the Lord, and then locating the onset of the Day of the Lord. However, this argument is seriously flawed. The exact onset of the Day of the Lord is much debated, and this argument tells how late the rapture can be, but not how late it must be.

A more fruitful line of argument is found in the examination of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3, which has established several points. First, only the pretribulational rapture view is able to explain why the Thessalonians considered the false report to be plausible. Second, two commonly cited weaknesses of the pretribulational view apply equally to the other views. Finally, it is possible that the Day of the Lord begins at the midpoint of the Tribulation period. This does not undermine the pretribulational rapture viewpoint, and may aid in the premillennial explanation of 1 Thessalonians 5.

---

week by the Antichrist's covenant. "Sudden destruction" refers to the onset of Satan's wrath and the intensification of divine judgment that accompanies it after the midpoint of the Tribulation.