

# THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE MESSIAH

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A STUDY OF THE SEQUENCE OF  
PROPHETIC EVENTS

By Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, Th.M., Ph.D.



***The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events***

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## Appendix II

### *II Thessalonians 2:1-12*

In any book dealing with eschatology, the well-known passage of II Thessalonians 2:1-12 must be brought into the discussion. There has been much debate as to the exact point or points Paul wished to make, the identity of the restrainer, and exactly what the relationship is between the Antichrist and the restrainer. In dealing with this passage, perhaps it would be best to first summarize the main points made and then proceed to an analysis of the text. The main points appear to be as follows: first, to comfort the believers of Thessalonica, letting them know that they are not in the day of the Lord or in the tribulation, which has not yet arrived; second, to teach that there will be two separate revelations of the Antichrist at different points in time to different groups; third, that two things are being restrained: the mystery of lawlessness in general now and the lawless one, the Antichrist, specifically in the future.

With this background, the next step is to take a look at the passage itself, which reads as follows:

*<sup>1</sup> Now we beseech you, brethren, touching the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, and our gathering together unto him; <sup>2</sup> to the end that ye be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor yet be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by epistle as from us, as that the day of the Lord is just at hand; <sup>3</sup> let no man beguile you in any wise: for it will not be, except the falling away come first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition, <sup>4</sup> he that opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped; so that he sits in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God. <sup>5</sup> Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And now ye know that which restrains, to the end that he may be revealed in his own season. <sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness does already work: only there is one that restrains now, until he be taken out of the way. <sup>8</sup> And then*

*shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord Yeshua shall slay with the breath of his mouth, and bring to nought by the manifestation of his coming; <sup>9</sup> even he, whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all deceit of unrighteousness for them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. <sup>11</sup> And for this cause God sends them a working of error, that they should believe a lie: <sup>12</sup> that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*

Apparently, after Paul left Thessalonica, some false teachers came in teaching a posttribulational doctrine and claiming that the believers were now in the tribulation. The Thessalonians were troubled that “the day of the Lord,” the most common term for the tribulation, had already arrived (vv. 1-2). This was especially true since in the first epistle, Paul clearly taught them a pretribulational rapture. At this point, Paul stated that the tribulation could not have come yet because two events, both of which must precede the tribulation, had not yet occurred (v. 3). The first is the *apostasia*, or the departure<sup>1</sup> of the church, and the second is the revelation of the man

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<sup>1</sup> In previous editions of this work, I presented a different viewpoint: that the term *apostasia* was referring to the apostasy of the church. The fact that in the last days, the church will depart from the faith is clearly taught in other passages, such as I Timothy 4:1-3. But is that true also of II Thessalonians 2:3? That was my assumption for many years, but at one point I began questioning this conclusion.

One reason I held this position was based on viewing II Thessalonians 2:3 from the perspective of systematic theology where conclusions are drawn from all sources. My conclusions on the II Thessalonian passage were drawn from the II Timothy passage. The second reason was based on another fact. I already knew that the Greek term *apostasia* could refer to a physical departure as well as a moral, ethical, or spiritual departure. In the vast majority of appearances, the term is used in the latter sense. Hence, the vast majority of theologians, including me, interpret II Thessalonians 2:3 according to this meaning of the term.

Rather than continuing to interpret the verse primarily from the viewpoint of systematic theology, I decided to research it from the perspective of biblical theology, which focuses more on a specific biblical writer and/or book. In this case, the focus was on both epistles to the Thessalonians before interpreting one verse in one of the epistles through a verse from a different book by the same author, but addressed to a different audience and written in a different context. Paul wrote I and II Thessalonians to the same church responding to questions they had written to

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him. In the first epistle, Paul dealt with the rapture of the church (4:13-18) and the day of the Lord (5:1-11). He clearly taught that the day of the Lord will not overtake the believer, but only the unbeliever, since believers are not appointed to wrath (v. 9) and the antecedent to wrath is the day of the Lord (v. 2). The verses show a pre-tribulational rapture. Between the two epistles, false teachers had come into the church announcing that the day of the Lord had begun. The news troubled the Thessalonians greatly, since it was the opposite of what Paul had taught them both in person and in writing (in the first epistle). So Paul wrote them the second epistle to let them know that it was not possible for them to be in the day of the Lord since two things had to precede this time, the first of which was the *apostasia*. This fact raised a question in my mind: Is it possible that Paul mentioned the *apostasia* in II Thessalonians 2:3 in order to reaffirm what he had written in the first epistle, namely, that the believers would not enter the day of the Lord?

What finally helped to convince me is Dr. Andy Woods' booklet *The Falling Away: Spiritual Departure or Physical Departure?*, published by Dispensational Publishing House in 2018. Among the points Woods makes are the following:

1. There have always been doctrinal departures, even in the first century (p. 6-8).
2. There is a definite article before the noun *apostasia*, just as there is a definite article before "man of sin" in the same verse. Woods states: "By providing these two definite articles essentially Paul is indicating that the apostasy will be something that has specific, time-bound qualities just like the man of sin's coming has such qualities. In other words, just like the advent of the man of sin will be specific and an instantaneous event in future history, the coming *apostasia*, or departure, will similarly be specific and time bound . . . [it] will also take place instantaneously." (p. 15-16).
3. The Greek noun *apostasia* can refer to a physical departure, and examples include Matthew 5:31, 19:7; and Mark 10:4 (p. 17-20).
4. The verbal form of *apostasia* is *aphistēmi*. Woods states: "Only three times does the verb *aphistēmi* mean a spiritual departure [Lk. 8:13; I Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12] . . . However, the majority of times, or a full seventy-five percent of instances 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." (p. 21).

Woods made additional observations in his booklet, but these four were the main points that finally convinced me that II Thessalonians 2:3 is speaking of a physical departure, which will be the rapture of the church. Hence, the verse provides additional evidence for a pre-tribulational rapture.

of sin, *the son of perdition*. There is to be a revelation of the identity of the Antichrist that precedes the tribulation, and it is for the believers living at that time. It is important to note that this will be a new generation of believers who will have accepted the gospel after the rapture of the church. The believers at that time will receive a revelation as to the identity of the Antichrist, and it will occur at some time before the tribulation starts. The text does not state exactly how this revelation will come, but other Scriptures provide two possible clues. First, it is clear from Daniel 9:27 that the tribulation will begin with the signing of a seven-year covenant between Israel and the Antichrist. When this covenant is announced, believers will become aware of the identity of the Antichrist. Second, it is also possible that believers will deduce who he is by the numerical value of the Antichrist's name, which will be 666.

Then, Paul stated two things concerning the Antichrist (v. 4). First, he will be opposed to God and to all objects of veneration. Second, he will take over the Jewish temple and declare himself to be god and will call all men to worship him. This event will occur in the middle of the tribulation in conjunction with the abomination of desolation.

Verses 5-7 are somewhat parenthetical, as Paul reminded his readers of truths he had taught them while he was still with them (v. 5). The key truth was the fact that the takeover of the Jewish temple and the self-declaration of deity will be restrained, and until the restrainer is removed, the events of verse 4 cannot occur (v. 6). It has already been shown in the main body of this book that what will restrain the Antichrist from full political and religious control will be three of the ten kings of the first half of the tribulation and the governments they represent.<sup>2</sup> It is only when the last of these three kings has been killed, leading to complete submission by the other seven kings, that the Antichrist will be free to take over full global dictatorship and to carry out the actions of verse 4. Consequently, the last restrainer of the Antichrist will be the last of the three kings and the government which he represents. Then Paul reminded his readers that the mystery of lawlessness is already working and is even now being restrained (v. 7). The Holy Spirit is never described as restraining lawlessness. The task of restraining

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<sup>2</sup> See chapters 2 and 11 of this work.

evil was given to human government under the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9:1-17, and this basic doctrinal truth was reiterated by Paul in Romans 13:1-7. On one hand, human government is even now restraining lawlessness. On the other hand, the government of the last of the three kings will restrain the Antichrist, the lawless one, until the middle of the tribulation.<sup>3</sup>

After the parenthetical reminder of verses 5-7, in verses 8-12, Paul returned to where he left off at verse 4. According to verse 8, the abomination of desolation of verse 4 will serve as the second revelation of the Antichrist. While the first revelation will be to the believers before the tribulation, the second revelation in the middle of the tribulation will be to Israel. By the very act of the abomination of desolation, the Antichrist will be revealed as truly being the lawless one, and then Israel can realize with whom they have made their covenant. In Matthew 24:15-22, Yeshua clearly called the act of the abomination of desolation a sign to Israel. Paul then proceeded to provide further details regarding the Antichrist. Antichrist will ultimately be destroyed by the second coming (v. 8b). Energized by Satan, he will be able to perform miracles (v. 9) for the purpose of worldwide deception, for he will call all men to worship him (v. 10). The ones who will be deceived by him and his counterfeit signs are those who have already rejected the gospel of Yeshua the Messiah (vv. 11-12). These verses have often been taken to mean that those who heard the gospel before the rapture and did not believe will not have the opportunity to be saved after the rapture and during the tribulation. However, the passage itself places the rejection of the gospel during the tribulation itself rather than before the tribulation. It should be remembered that during the first half of the tribulation, 144,000 Jews will be preaching the gospel all over the world (Mt. 24:14; Rev. 7). Furthermore, before members of humanity have to decide whether to accept or reject taking the mark of the beast, an angelic voice will proclaim the gospel to each person in his or her own language (Rev. 14:6-7). While myriads will accept the gospel, many more will not. Because these many will refuse to respond to the preaching of the 144,000 during the first half of the tribulation, during the second half, they will be deceived by the Antichrist and will

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<sup>3</sup> For details regarding this mystery, see Appendix VI.

begin to worship him. The initial act of worshiping the Antichrist will involve accepting the mark 666. Once this mark is taken, the individual will have reached the point of no return and will not have the opportunity to be saved from then on (Rev. 14:9-12).