

# Is the Tribulation Before the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians?

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon examines the posttribulationist view of 2 Thessalonians and argues that it fails to account for the alarm of the Thessalonians that they were already in the day of the Lord and the great tribulation.*

**Scripture:** 2 Thessalonians 2:6

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Rapture Theology"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the posttribulationist perspective on 2 Thessalonians, highlighting the comfort given to the persecuted Thessalonian Christians and the correction of their misunderstanding regarding the day of the Lord. The passage addresses the need for patient waiting for Christ and the evidence required before the day of the Lord can come, including the revelation of the man of sin. The debate over the interpretation of 'the falling away' or 'the rebellion' in relation to the rapture is discussed, with differing views among scholars like E. Schuyler English and Kenneth S. Wuest.

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## Transcript

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This series, begun in Bibliotheca Sacra with the January-March, 1975 issue, is now published in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976). This article is adapted from chapter 10 in the book. The series will continue through the January March 1978 issue.]

Posttribulationists often cite two passages in 2 Thessalonians in support of their viewpoint. The first concerns the comfort extended to the Thessalonians in their persecution in 1:5-10 ; the second is the word of correction concerning Paul's teaching which had reached the Thessalonians, as stated in 2:1-12 . A third reference--2 Thessalonians 3:5, where the believers are exhorted to "patient waiting for Christ"--is indecisive, for it is similar to many other references to their hope of the Lord's return.

Posttribulationism and 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

It is apparent from both Thessalonian epistles that the Christians in that city had undergone much persecution. This arose from the same causes that had forced Paul, Silas, and Timothy to flee Thessalonica for their lives. This suffering is mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 3:3-5 ; and 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5. Paul exhorted the Christians to bear in mind that in due time God would punish their

persecutors. He wrote:

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will Paul asserts here that the Thessalonians were wrong in thinking that they were already in the day of the Lord, because there was a total lack of evidence for it. Two main evidences are mentioned: first, what the King James calls "a falling away" ("the rebellion" in NIV); second, that the man of lawlessness (NIV) or the man of sin (KJV) has not been revealed. Both of these would be necessary before the day of the Lord could really "come."

The word translated "the falling away" or "the rebellion" is from the Greek ἀποστασία from which the English word apostasy is derived. Some debate has arisen as to the exact meaning of this word, which could also be rendered "the departure." E. Schuyler English and others have suggested that the word means literally "departure" and refers to the rapture itself.[4] E. Schuyler English, *Rethinking the Rapture* (Travelers Rest, SC: Southern Bible Book House, 1954), p. 65.

Gundry argues at length against this interpretation, which would explicitly place the rapture before the day of the Lord, and his evidence is quite convincing. English is joined by the Greek scholar Kenneth S. Wuest, but their view has not met with general acceptance by either pretribulationists or posttribulationists.[5] Kenneth S. Wuest, "The Rapture--Precisely When?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (January-March 1957): 69-70. A number of pretribulationists have interpreted the apostasy in this way as the departure of the church, but the evidence against this translation is impressive. In that case Gundry, seconded by Ladd, is probably right: the word refers to doctrinal defection of the special character that will be revealed in the day of the Lord. In this instance pretribulationists can agree with posttribulationists without agreeing with their conclusions on the passage as a whole.

The error into which the Thessalonians had fallen; according to Gundry, was one of two possibilities:

First, the Thessalonians, unaware of a pretribulational rapture, were led to believe that they had entered the tribulation, which they thought was part of the day of the Lord... Second, the Thessalonians thought that a pretribulation rapture had already occurred and that they had been left behind in the tribulation, which (as in the preceding view) they believed to be a part of the day of the Lord.[6] Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 118-19.

Gundry's second hypothesis--that the Thessalonians feared they had been left behind in the tribulation--makes sense only if the Thessalonians had been taught pretribulationism. If they were posttribulationists, there was no reason for concern; thus Gundry rejects that second hypothesis and its pretribulationist implications.

As a posttribulationist, Gundry holds that the pretribulational rapture view here is impossible because under the circumstances Paul, in correcting an error, would have made "a categorical statement to the effect that the rapture will take place before the tribulation. Such a statement nowhere appears." [7] *Ibid.*, p. 119. Here, once again, Gundry argues from the silence of the passage.

The fact is that as the passage continues, Paul is not silent about the rapture intervening, if the passage is rightly interpreted. Nevertheless, Gundry goes on speculating for several more pages about the nature of the error of the Thessalonians. The crux of the matter, however, is found in Paul's discussion immediately

following.

Beginning with verse 6 , the apostle reminded them of what he had previously taught them: an event had to occur first before the man of sin could be revealed. Pretribulationists find in this a direct reference to the rapture as proof that the Thessalonians had the wrong point of view. Paul wrote:

And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming (2 Thess 2:6-8, NIV).

Paul then describes further what will happen in connection with the coming of the lawless one.

Posttribulationists generally are quite divided as to the character of the one who is restraining or holding back evil. Gundry presents a chart indicating the various views that the restrainer is God, the Antichrist, or Satan, all views held by posttribulationists.[8] Ibid., p. 123. As Gundry goes on to state, a popular view is that the restrainer is the Roman Empire or government itself.

Unlike his fellows, Gundry agrees that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, a view incompatible with posttribulationism. In support he offers evidence that this is an old view corroborated by the grammar and that the view is quite superior to the alternative views that the restraint is provided by the restrainer himself, whether it be the Roman Empire, human government today, or the Antichrist himself. is his broad statement, "At every point the posttribulational view of the passage commends itself." [9] Ibid., p. 128. This is pure dogmatism and is no substitute for solid argument. Actually it is impossible to harmonize Gundry's position on the Holy Spirit with posttribulationism,

Posttribulationism has failed to account for the alarm of the Thessalonians that they were already in the day of the Lord and the great tribulation. If they had been taught posttribulationism, they would not have been alarmed. The fact that Paul refutes it shows that they were in error in holding this position. If posttribulationism were right, Paul's approach to their correction could have been entirely different.

While posttribulationists and pretribulationists will continue to argue this passage, in reality there is nothing in it that teaches posttribulationism as such. Paul's correction of error begins in the very first verse of the passage by appealing to the Thessalonians' knowledge of the rapture; throughout the passage Paul appeals to their previous instruction in various points.

The exegesis of this passage reveals once again how Gundry has taken a position different from all preceding posttribulationists; if Gundry is right, then the preceding posttribulationists were wrong and vice versa. The common practice of counting up posttribulationists, and by their very numbers proving that posttribulationism is right, is based on the false premise that posttribulationists agree. As a matter of fact, they are quite diverse in their basic arguments and tend to contradict one another.

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