

Antichrist Comes First

2 Thessalonians 2

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In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul directly addressed the problem that precipitated his Epistle. Some believers had been told their relief from persecution was imminent, and that Jesus was about to return momentarily. This error was dealt with decisively by Paul.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4

*1 Now we beseech you, brethren, by **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him,***

2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.

*3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for **that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;***

4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

(KJV)

This passage is very clear to the casual reader, and needs very little comment if we just take it at face value. But, because it is so devastating to the pretribulation view, much has been written to explain it away. Therefore, to do it justice, we will need to take it a verse at a time in some detail.

Verse 1 - The Topic of Discussion

*1 Now we beseech you, brethren, by **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him,***

Paul's topic of discussion was the "coming" of Jesus and "our gathering together unto Him." It is necessary to establish whether Paul was **distinguishing** or **connecting** the "coming" of Jesus and "our gathering together" to Him. Some pretribulationists claim that Paul was introducing two separate topics, the rapture (our gathering together) and the second coming (the coming) as separate events. This question is easily resolved from the Greek text. When two nouns of the same case are connected by "and" (kai), if the first noun has the article (the) and the second noun does not, the two nouns are being

connected, being viewed as a unit. If both nouns have the article (the), they are being distinguished — viewed as being distinct or contrasted.¹ The words in question are as follows:

της παρουσιας του κυριου ημων Ιησου Χριστου
the coming the Lord our Jesus Christ

και ημων επισυναγωγης επ αυτον
and our gathering- to Him
together

As you can see, "the coming" has the definite article (the). The second noun "gathering together" does not have the article. Therefore, both the "coming" and "gathering together" are seen as united. In this case, the second noun (gathering together) is a component part of the first noun (coming), as demonstrated clearly in Matt. 24:29-31. If Paul meant to distinguish them as occurring at different times, he would have also used the definite article with "gathering together," as follows:

της παρουσιας του κυριου ημων Ιησου Χριστου
the coming the Lord our Jesus Christ

και του επισυναγωγης ημων επ αυτον
and **the gathering-together** of us to Him

Since both nouns point to a single composite event, we can be certain that Paul's topic was the coming of Jesus **for His people**.² In essence, Paul was saying, "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, **more specifically**, our gathering together unto Him..." That is, the clause "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" refers to the whole event, as Paul had just described it to the Thessalonians in the previous chapter, including the destruction of the wicked (2 Thess. 1:7-10). But, since in chapter 2 Paul wished to get more specific, and deal with the problem at hand — the over enthusiasm of some who thought the rapture was imminent — he narrowed the discussion to focus exclusively on the gathering of Jesus' elect.

The second observation we should make is Paul's choice of words. "Gathering together" is a term the Thessalonians were very familiar with from the Olivet Discourse. This is a compound word used only a few times in Scripture. It is the noun form of the verb "epi-sunago." This compound verb is found in Matt. 24:31, Mark 13:27, Luke 17:37, all in reference to Jesus' gathering His elect "immediately after the tribulation" (cf. Matt. 24:29-31). In Matthew 24, Jesus said He would

dispatch His angels to "gather together His elect." Here, Paul referred to "our gathering together unto Him" using the noun form of the same word. While all words and phrases should be interpreted by their contexts, the similar phrases certainly carry considerable weight, particularly since this is a very rare expression in the Greek New Testament. Coupled with "the coming" (parousia) of Jesus Christ in both passages, "gathering together" can only mean one thing. Every occurrence of "epi-sunago" in the context of Christ's coming refers to His posttribulation coming (Matt. 24:31, Mark 13:27, Luke 17:37). Therefore, there is every reason to believe the Thessalonians would connect this "coming" (parousia) and "gathering together" with the "coming" (parousia) and "gather together" of Jesus' elect in Matt. 24:29-31. This is even more probable because Paul had just told them a few verses before that they could expect relief from persecution at Christ's (posttribulation) coming to destroy their persecutors (see previous article on 2 Thess. 1).

In summary, verse 1 flows from the discussion in the previous chapter. It narrows the discussion from the whole complex event known as the "parousia" of Jesus Christ, zeroing in on the matter of most concern to the Thessalonians — "our gathering together unto Him."

Verse 2 - The Problem Paul was Addressing

*2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that **the day of Christ is at hand**.*

What did Paul mean by soon (quickly) "shaken in mind" and "troubled?" The Greek word "shaken" means "waver, agitate, rock, or topple." It is the opposite of firmness or steadfastness. Since Paul wrote "soon shaken in mind," he most likely meant to be quickly or easily moved or shaken from sound doctrine concerning their expectancy of Christ's coming. The Greek word for "troubled" means "to cry out" and implies being anxious. Paul did not want his readers to be quickly or easily shaken in their minds from the proper kind of expectancy regarding Christ's coming. Their thinking that Christ's coming was about to occur, when in fact it was not, could easily shake them from their composure and firm footing. Paul mentioned three things that might have caused their wrong expectation: spirit, word, or forged Epistle. "Spirit" most likely referred to some kind of alleged word from the Lord in a false prophecy circulating among them. "Word" no doubt means oral false teaching. "Letter as from us" refers to a counterfeit Epistle, allegedly from Paul. In 2 Thess. 3:17-18, Paul reminded them of his unique way of signing his Epistles, so they would know it was really from him.

The Textual Variant

This verse is problematic for two reasons, both related to variant readings in our English Versions. The majority of Greek manuscripts (and KJV/NKJV) read "the

day of Christ." But, a small number of early manuscripts (and most modern versions) have *"the day of the Lord."* From a posttribulationist's perspective, either reading is acceptable because we view the *"day of Christ"* and the *"day of the Lord"* as being the same posttribulation coming. However, pretribulationists have a serious problem either way.

If *"the day of Christ"* is the correct reading, every other occurrence of *"day of Christ"* in the New Testament refers to our hope - the rapture (cf. Phil. 1:10, Phil. 2:16). Once again, this is consistent with verse one which speaks of *"our gathering together unto Him"* as the topic of discussion. Yet, as we shall see, the next verse plainly says that this day (our gathering together to Him - the Day of Christ) cannot come until after the Antichrist is revealed. Therefore, if *"the day of Christ"* is the correct reading, this passage plainly puts the rapture after the revelation of Antichrist, and makes the pretribulationist's idea of *"imminence"* utterly impossible. *"Day of Christ"* is consistent with the posttribulation scenario, and very problematic for the pretribulation scenario.

If the minority reading, *"the day of the Lord,"* is what Paul wrote, pretribulationists are faced with the fact that this term is consistently used of Christ's posttribulation coming. Paul gave the Thessalonian believers instructions regarding **their watching for** the *"Day of the Lord"* in 1 Thess. 5, implying that it is the day for which Christians wait. Peter and Joel wrote that it occurs after the cosmic signs Jesus placed *"immediately after the tribulation"* (cf. Matt. 24:29-31 & Acts 2:20), making it entirely posttribulational. Yet, here, Paul plainly connected the *"Day of the Lord"* with *"our gathering together unto Him"* (assuming this variant reading). Pretribulationists have the same problem here as they have in 1 Thess. 5. The rapture is connected with a clear posttribulational event - the Day of the Lord which occurs after the cosmic signs mentioned in Matt. 24:29-31.

Typically, modern pretribulationists assume that the *"Day of the Lord"* includes the entire tribulation. They do not take the term *"day"* literally, but stretch it out to include the entire seven years of the tribulation, encompassing the alleged rapture, the entire tribulation, and the posttribulation coming. This eases the problem for them in both 1 Thess. 5 and in this passage. However, the timing of the cosmic signs, being after the tribulation (Matt. 24:29) and before the Day of the Lord (Acts 2:20), renders this idea impossible. No matter which variant reading pretribulationists adopt, this passage undermines their view of the rapture occurring at a different time than the second coming, and utterly demolishes the concept that the rapture is imminent now (prior to the revelation of Antichrist).

The Translation — "is at hand" or "has come"

The second problem in verse two is the proper translation of the word *enesthken*. The KJV translates it "is at hand" (implying imminence or immediacy). Most modern versions read "has come" implying a past event. The Greek word can either mean "is present," or "is at hand," (imminent or immediate). A.T. Robertson, one of the most respected Greek scholars, wrote the following about this Greek word and its use in this verse.

*"In 1Th 4:13-5:3 Paul had plainly said that Jesus would come as a thief in the night and had shown that the dead would not be left out in the rapture. But evidently some one claimed to have a private epistle from Paul which supported the view that Jesus was coming at once, {as that the day of the Lord is now present} (|hōs hoti enestēken hē hēmera tou kuriou |). Perfect active indicative of |enistēmi |, old verb, to place in, but intransitive **in this tense to stand in or at or near. So "is imminent"** (Lightfoot). The verb is common in the papyri." ³ (bold & underline mine)*

As usual, Robertson quoted from the English Revised Version (ERV 1881) which he favored over the KJV. Yet, his analysis of the Greek actually agrees with the KJV against the ERV (and most modern versions).

Another highly regarded Baptist Greek scholar, John Gill, wrote: "**as that the day of Christ is at hand**; or is at this instant just now coming on; as if it would be within that year, in some certain month, and on some certain day in it; which notion the apostle would have them by no means give into, for these reasons, because should Christ not come, as there was no reason to believe he would in so short a time, they would be tempted to disbelieve his coming at all, at least be very indifferent about it; and since if it did not prove true, they might be led to conclude there was nothing true in the Christian doctrine and religion." ⁴

Pretribulationists sometimes appeal to the fact that Paul used the perfect tense here, which implies a completed action. On that basis they claim the Thessalonians did not think the rapture was imminent, but rather thought that the "Day of the Lord" (which they wrongly define as the tribulation) had already come. In other words, they thought they were already in the tribulation. However, according to Thayer's Greek lexicon, the Greek word "enesthken," translated "at hand," means "to place in or among, to put in, to be upon, **to impend, to threaten, to be close at hand, to be present.**" Using the perfect tense form would indicate the Thessalonians thought that the coming of Christ **had just become** "imminent" or "at hand." In other words, the new false teaching indicated that whatever had been delaying Christ's return for them no longer hindered His coming, and He could be expected to appear almost immediately, or momentarily. The perfect tense (indicating completed action) was related to the new belief on their part. The Thessalonians had wrongly been

persuaded (because of a false prophecy, false teaching, or false Pauline Epistle), that some current events (probably their persecution) had fulfilled the signs of Jesus' coming, and that Jesus could be expected to come for them momentarily. The ASV captures this meaning rather well. "*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***".

In summary, verse 2 indicates the problem Paul was addressing. The Thessalonians wrongly believed some false prophecy, teaching or counterfeit epistle, indicating that the Day of Christ's coming for them had just become imminent (or at hand), and that Jesus was coming momentarily. This new teaching caused great excitement, agitation, and controversy in the Thessalonian church.

Verse 3 - The Solution to the Problem

*3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for **that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;***

It is significant that just before setting these believers straight, Paul echoed Jesus' words at the beginning of His Olivet Discourse. In Jesus' reply to the disciples' question, "*When shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of Your coming and the end of the age,*" Jesus replied, "*Take heed that no man deceive you.*" Jesus followed this with a series of signs that must all occur before His coming.

In this passage, Paul began to correct the error of the Thessalonians with precisely the same instruction. Paul wrote, "*let no man deceive you by any means,*" and then reminded them of the same signs Jesus placed before His coming and gathering together His elect. Paul went on to say that certain things must come before the "*Day of Christ,*" and "*our gathering together unto Him.*" He was plainly indicating that the rapture is **not yet imminent**. Why? Because the things Jesus prophesied, that must come before Jesus would dispatch His angels to gather together His elect (Matt. 24:29-31), had not yet occurred.

There is no question that Paul was referring his readers back to Jesus' teaching in general, and the Olivet Discourse in particular. The two things Paul said must come before the "*Day of Christ*" and our being gathered to Christ are the two central features of Jesus' Olivet Discourse.

PAUL - 2 things that precede the rapture	JESUS - 2 things that precede the 2nd coming
<p>"That day shall not come unless there come <u>a falling away first...</u>"</p>	<p>"Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many <u>will fall away</u> and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved." [Matt. 24. 9-13 (NASB)]</p>
<p>"...and the Man of Sin be revealed, the son of perdition.... who <u>sitteth in the Temple of God</u>, showing himself that he is God."</p>	<p>"When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, <u>stand in the holy place</u>, (whoso readeth, let him understand):" [Matt. 24:15]</p>

The evidence is overwhelming that Paul was alluding to the Olivet Discourse. He corrected the error, that the Day of Christ was upon them, and that the rapture could be expected at any moment, by referring them to the very things Jesus said would precede His coming after the tribulation. Again, we see a distinct pattern of Paul's conformity to the Olivet Discourse rather than teaching a pretribulation rapture in contrast to Christ's teaching. This statement by Paul is clear and direct. The Thessalonians should not be deceived by false prophecy, false teaching, or false Epistles, that Christ's coming to gather His elect to Himself had become imminent. This cannot occur until **after** the "falling away," and the "Man of Sin is revealed." Therefore, the rapture cannot be imminent until after the signs occur that Jesus gave to His disciples in the Olivet Discourse. Paul resolved the problem in the Thessalonian church by appealing to the Olivet Discourse.

The table below is provided for a quick comparison of the themes Paul certainly borrowed from Jesus. We have color coded these concepts as follows:

1. **The gathering of the saints**
2. **Jesus' coming in power and glory**
3. **Warning against deception**
4. **Apostasy**
5. **Revelation of the "Man of Sin"**

Matt 24:4,9-15,21,29-31

4 And Jesus answered and said unto them, **Take heed that no man deceive you.** (KJV) ...

9 "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name.

10 "And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another.

11 "And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many.

12 "And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold.

13 "But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved.

14 "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.

15 "Therefore when you see **the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place** (let the reader understand),...

21 for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. ...

29 "But **immediately after the tribulation** of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken,

30 and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and **they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.**

31 "And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will **gather together His elect** from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

(NASB)

II Thess 2:1-4

Now we beseech you, brethren, **by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**, and by **our gathering together unto him**,

2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.

3 **Let no man deceive you by any means:** for that day shall not come, except there come **a falling away first**, and **that man of sin be revealed**, the son of perdition;

4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that **he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.**

(KJV)

In summary, there is perfect agreement between Jesus and Paul regarding the rapture. And, that agreement shows only a post-trib gathering of Jesus' elect.

Verse 4 - The Revelation of the Man of Sin

4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

In verse 3, Paul warned the Thessalonians not to let anyone deceive them that Christ's coming for them was imminent. While the "falling away" or "apostasy" might be a difficult sign for Christians to recognize because it would not be a single event in one location, the revealing of the Man of Sin was something hard to miss. Jesus spoke of the "*abomination of desolation*" standing in the holy place, and referred back to Daniel's prophecy (Matt. 24:15). Daniel prophesied that the Antichrist would enter the Temple with his forces, and place an object in the Holy Place (Dan. 11:31). Mark's account of the Olivet Discourse also implies an inanimate object being set up in the Holy Place (Mark 13:14). This could refer to the "*image of the Beast*" in Revelation. Or perhaps, it could refer to a throne on which the Antichrist will sit. Either way, there is no doubt that Daniel, Jesus, and Paul spoke of the same event. And we know both from Dan. 9:27 and Dan. 12:11 that this event will occur 3.5 years before the second coming, or in the middle of the 7 years (70th week). This is another problem for pretribulationists because the very sign that Paul placed before Jesus' coming for us actually occurs 3.5 years after the tribulation begins in their scenario! It is also further evidence that Paul was relying on Jesus' teaching in this passage.

The coming of Christ for His people is not yet imminent. It cannot be considered imminent until certain signs occur. One of these signs will be easily recognized, when the Man of Sin takes his place in the Temple in Jerusalem claiming to be God and demanding worship. Until that occurs, it is wrong to suppose that Jesus might come momentarily, or that His coming is imminent. And those who insist that His coming is imminent, whether by an alleged prophecy, a teaching, or a forged document, are to be ignored. Do not allow them to deceive you.

Conclusion

The pretribulation rapture scenario is completely overthrown by this passage. Even if we allowed the variant "Day of the Lord" rather than "Day of Christ," and if we allowed their wrong definition of the term "Day of the Lord" as referring to the entire tribulation, the passage still makes no sense in a pretribulation scenario. If the Thessalonians had previously been taught to expect a pretribulation rapture, and if they had been deceived into thinking the tribulation had begun and they were still here, how do you suppose a pretribulationist Paul would have responded? The obvious answer is he would remind them that the rapture is pretribulationary, and they cannot possibly be in the tribulation because "*our gathering together unto Him*" is BEFORE the tribulation! Telling them that the Apostasy and revelation of the Man of Sin must come first does not resolve the problem in the least, but actually makes it much worse! In effect, it says that the Antichrist will be revealed before the tribulation (and allegedly the rapture). How then could the pretribulation rapture be "imminent" as pretribulationists claim? Or, if they attempt to dodge the problem by saying that the revelation of Antichrist is before the tribulation, but the rapture is even before that, then Paul did not resolve the problem at all! Why would telling them that the Antichrist

must come before the tribulation even matter to them, if it was a supposed pretribulation rapture that they had missed? Also, putting Antichrist's revelation before the 70th week contradicts Paul who put in it the middle of the 70th week, connecting his revelation to the abomination of desolation (see vs. 4)! The fact is, the pretribulation rapture scenario simply won't work in this passage no matter how much one tries to force it.

As we have seen by the side by side comparison, this passage flows easily and naturally from both Jesus' Olivet Discourse and from Paul's statements in the previous chapter. It agrees in substance and sequence with Jesus. The Thessalonians had been instructed previously about Jesus' coming from the Olivet Discourse. This discourse lists a series of signs that must come before Jesus comes to gather together His elect after the tribulation. There was a false teaching circulating among the Thessalonians, which had originated in either a false prophecy, false teaching, or false Epistle, that Jesus' coming for them had just become imminent or momentarily. The post-trib Paul corrects the problem by referring them back to Jesus' Olivet Discourse, reminding them of the two major signs Jesus gave: the apostasy and the abomination of desolation. In chapter one, Paul taught the Thessalonians, who were suffering great persecution, that they could expect relief when Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire, with his army of angels, to destroy their persecutors. Paul went on in chapter 2 to remind them to wait for the signs Jesus gave in His Olivet Discourse.

NOTES

1 Granville Sharp's **sixth rule** reads as follows: "And as the insertion of the copulative kai between nouns of the same case, without articles, (according to the fifth rule,) **denotes that the second noun expresses a different person, thing, or quality, from the preceding noun, so, likewise, the same effect attends the copulative when each of the nouns are preceded by articles**, as in the following examples - (John 1:17, John 2:22, John 11:44, Col. 2:2, 2 Tim. 1:5, 1 Pet. 4:11)." [Remarks on the uses of the Definite Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament; Granville Sharp, 1778] Essentially, the first rule deals with the TSKS (article-substantive-kai-substantive) which views the nouns together as a unit. The sixth rule concerns the TSKTS (article-substantive-kai-article substantive) construction and indicates that a distinction is being drawn between the two nouns.

2 F.F. Bruce draws the same conclusion from the Greek syntax in his commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians (p. 163). However, Daniel Wallace (pre-tribulationist Greek scholar) writes, "Since the TSKS construction involves impersonal substantives, the highest degree of doubt is cast upon the probability of the terms referring to the same event." [Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, p. 290]. But, Wallace himself, on pages 286-289 proved with several examples that impersonal TSKS constructions are meant to unite two substantives in a single unit. Wallace lists 5 types of impersonal TSKS constructions and their significance: "a) distinct entities, though united, b) overlapping entities, c) first entity subset of second, d) second group subset of first, e) both entities identical." (pp. 286-288). Impersonal nouns in a Sharp TSKS construction rarely mean that the two nouns are synonymous things. The "parousia" (coming of Christ) is NOT the same thing as "our gathering together unto him." The Sharp TSKS construction with impersonal nouns does not frequently identify the two nouns as being absolutely synonyms ("e" in Wallace's list of types of impersonal TSKS). Rather, it usually implies that they are being viewed together as a unit for a specific reason within the context. In fact, Wallace demonstrates with several examples that a TSKS construction with impersonal

nouns frequently indicates that one noun is a subset of the other. In other words, while the nouns are not identical things, one noun is a component part of the other. It is obvious from Matt. 24:29-31 that the "parousia" is not identical with the "gathering" of Jesus' elect. The former involves Christ Himself, while the latter involves believers. Yet, it is clear from Matt. 24:29-31 that the "gathering together" of the elect is a component part of the "parousia" of Christ. The "parousia" (coming) mentioned repeatedly in the context (vss. 3, 27,37,39) is the event described in verse 30, when all the tribes of the earth will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Yet, during this "coming" (parousia) Jesus will send His angels to "gather together" His elect (v. 31). Therefore, while the two substantives themselves do not have identical meanings, the "gathering together" is clearly a component part or subset of the "parousia." The term "parousia" of Christ represents the whole complex "coming" including all of its component parts mentioned in Matt. 24:29-31. The "gathering together" of the elect is simply one component part of the "parousia." Consequently, when Paul referred to "*the parousia and gathering-together*" using the TSKS construction he intended to view these two things as a unit, exactly as in Matt. 24:29-31. Based on the known precedent in the Olivet Discourse, the TSKS impersonal construction in 2 Thess. 2:1 indicates that Paul meant the following: "*Concerning the parousia (coming) of our Lord Jesus Christ, and **more specifically** our gathering together unto Him...*" In any case, Wallace himself asserts that regardless of whether impersonal, plural, or personal substantives are used, the TSKS construction always intends to show some kind of unity.

3 A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures, 2 Thess. 2:2.

4 John Gill, Gill's Exposition of the Bible, 2 Thess. 2:2