

Studies in Soteriology – DALTON LIFSEY

SESSION: ADDRESSING THE GREAT FALLING AWAY BIBLICALLY AND CONTEXTUALLY

Addressing the Great Falling Away Biblically and Contextually

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. In this document I want to address what Paul referred to in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 as “the falling away.” In verse 3 the apostle declares that *TWO EVENTS* must happen before the “Day of the Lord” can come. The “great falling away” is one of those events (the other is the emergence of Antichrist). There is *serious* confusion over this issue that only Biblical exegesis can remedy. That remedy is both theological and deeply pastoral; and one that we need to filter our eschatology through.
- B. Any sermon that is preached on this text but is done *out of context with the rest of the book and the rest of the chapter* will be quite flawed and skewed. That is, it must be read, spoken of and embraced with the context on either side to frame the information contained in Paul’s eschatological message.
- C. So my goal in this session is three-fold:
 - 1. First, I want to argue that our eschatology must be framed, saturated and under-girded by our Soteriology so that we don’t end up distorting one or the other. I say this because this is exactly what we see in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. It’s profound. Paul rounds off his explanation of the Day of the Lord events with one of the clearest soteriological statements in the New Testament; and one that dramatically affects the way we view the statements that precede them.
 - 2. Secondly, I want to show that Paul wasn’t warning of an imminent departure from the faith by those who had been “saved,” “sanctified” and who have “belief in the truth” (Christians). The falling away is not one in which the regenerate become degenerate but one parallel to the first coming of Jesus when the fraudulence of the nations religious atmosphere was exposed by the dramatic changing of the times and seasons. The text that follows Paul’s discourse on the great falling away is unequivocally clear that those who do in fact fall away into “destruction,” “perdition” and “condemnation” are those who were wicked, unbelieving and unregenerate from the start and who were never truly “saved.”
 - 3. Thirdly, I want to argue that we must preach of the falling away but faithful to the way in which the Testaments do. And the Testaments present apostasy as an exposing of that which is fraudulent through extreme measures. We must warn, we must blow the trumpet and we must proclaim the imminence of what is around the corner. And in

doing so we must do in such a way that makes clear to the hearers why what's going to happen is going to happen. It makes all the difference in the world to say "the falling away is believers who lose their salvation" and "the falling away is the exposing of that which is false but is being paraded as true." Our warnings of falling away must be in line with the book of Hebrews that stresses the distinction between the true and the false. This is the New Testament way of warning of apostasy.

- D. As far as I'm concerned these two truths are indispensable to us. Especially to those who like John the Baptist are "preparing the way of the Lord" at the end of the age. For to prepare the Body of Christ for the intense days ahead, the days Paul was referring to, is to embrace the totality of that Paul said about it. And the great falling away is only part of it; it's but external, it's what we'll see. What we have *behind* the scenes is the glorious purposes of God made manifest in the lives of blood bought lovers who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Those whose hearts have been given "eternal comfort and good hope by grace" by God who "comforts and strengthens our hearts." (2 Thess. 2:16-17).

II. THE BLENDING OF SOTERIOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY – AN OUTLINE OF 2 THESS. 2

- A. Red and Yellow are distinct colors. Yet when mixed they become Orange. They retain distinction and yet at the same time blend together to be one and the same. So too must it be with our Eschatology and our Soteriology. The reason why I believe we need to have an "Orange" sort of theology is because it's apparent that the authors of the New Testament saw it this way. They had no terms for "the study of salvation" and "the study of the end-times." They just used the term "the mystery of the Gospel." The Gospel of the Kingdom included all these elements. That's why Paul frustrates systematic theologians so often – he moves in and out of camps and systems with such ease. We see this with Soteriology and Eschatology in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2.

- B. I won't labor the point that Soteriology and Eschatology must be blended together (though kept distinct) because an outline of the chapter argues the point just fine.

1. **Eschatology – Correction Concerning the Day of the Lord (2:1-12)**

- a. Concerning the Second Coming and Rapture: It's Not yet! (2:1-2)
- b. Two Key Events that Indicate when the Day of the Lord is Upon Us (2:3-5)
- c. The Revealing of the Person and Work of Antichrist (2:6-10)
- d. Divine Delusion & Condemnation for Those who don't receive the Love of the Truth (2:11-12)

2. **Soteriology – Celebration Concerning the Salvation of the Lord (2:13-17)**

- a. We've Been Saved by Election, Sanctification and the Gift of Faith (2:13)
- b. He called us with that 4-Fold End in Mind (2:14)
- c. In Light of that Stand Firm Facing the Day of the Lord! (2:15)
- d. Paul Prays for Eternal Comfort, Good Hope, Grace and Strength for Them (2:16-

17)

- C. If we look at the flow of Paul's thought we see the heart of Paul's message to the redeemed that will be facing this incredible hour. We must approach the subject of the Day of the Lord and all of the issues that come with it (Antichrist, Great Falling Away, etc.) with a sound Biblical Soteriology and a contextual understanding of the passage that we're considering; such as this one.
- D. Many times I've heard statements from the first 12 verses quoted that are diametrically opposed to the 5 verses that follow it! Before we make conclusions about what Paul means in the first twelve verses we need context and we need to have "the Gospel of the Kingdom" in mind; a Gospel that includes both Soteriology and Eschatology.
- E. The text couldn't be any clearer. Here is the main point:

Paul moved from one of the most explicit discourses on the final generation in Scripture to one of the most profound Soteriological statements about the nature of salvation and the implications for the believer who lives through the hour that he's explaining.

III. WHAT IS THE GREAT FALLING AWAY AND WHO'S FALLING?

- A. Having seen the context of both the eschatological discourse and the soteriological celebration and prayer in an outline to gain some perspective I want to explore the meaning of "the Great Falling Away." All could agree that an inaccurate estimation of these words could do unimaginable damage to the Body of Christ. To address what I believe is the Biblical testimony of this reality I want to ask and answer two questions:
 - 1. What is the Great Falling Away?
 - 2. Who's Falling?
- B. The term "apostasy" or "falling away" was translated from the Greek word "*he apostasia*." It derives from "*Apo*" (575) and "*histemi*." *Apo* means "FROM" and *Histemi* means "TO PLACE OR TO STAND." In the strictest sense of the word it means to stand away from or to place oneself at a distance from something of someone. The verb is found in multitudes of passages such as Luke 2:37 ("Anna never *departed from* the Temple"), 4:13 ("when the devil had *departed from Him*"), 8:14; 13:27; Acts 5:37, 38; 12:10; 15:38; 19:9; 22:29; 2 Cor. 12:8; 1 Tim. 4:1; 6:5; 2 Tim. 2:19; and Heb. 3:12. The word implies a distancing from something or someone in a spatial, identificational, relational or personal way. ***So, the "falling away" or "apostasy" is a conscious decision to depart from the profession of faith in Christ and company of those who remain with Him.*** That is, at the end of the age masses will distance themselves from Christ the same way that the "devil left" Jesus or the angel "left Peter."

1. Verse 3 introduces the idea that there is coming an apostasy. And in verses 7-12 we see what the nature and culmination of the apostasy looks like. It looks like resisting truth so much that God sends them a delusion before He condemns them to hell with the Antichrist. This is a very serious apostasy! In fact, there is no other historic example of apostasy that compares to this.
- C. Now the big question is: Are they who “depart” regenerate, justified, sanctified and elected individuals whom the Bible refers to as “saved” or does it refer to unregenerate, condemned, unclean and reprobate individuals whom the Bible refers to as “lost”? I want to argue the latter from three perspectives: (1) a theological perspective, (2) an exegetical perspective from 2 Thess. 2:1-17 and (3) a historical perspective.
- D. ***The Theological Perspective***
1. Scripture as a whole gives testimony to the fact that apostasy is not so much a statement of the “weak faith” that was trumped by the strong flesh of true believers leading them out of eternal life and into eternal destruction but rather ***the fruit of divine judgment that exposes false ones who do not have saving faith***. As we’ll see once we do an exegesis on this particular text in 2 Thessalonians, apostasy is a necessary event that accompanies historic transitions (of which we’ll also look at later).
 2. **First of all, the Bible makes it clear – through abundant references – that there are those who profess to have faith but do not.** Two examples are relevant for us.
 - a. The first is Matthew 7:21-23. Here we read that not all who *profess* and *confess* that Jesus is Lord will be received by Him. Even many with great exploits and great stories of signs and wonders done in the name of Jesus will be turned away. What Jesus says is so important: “I never knew you.” That is, “You were never mine. You were always fine left to yourself. You wanted it that way and I left you that way. Depart from Me. I *never* knew you.” This is startling but so clear from the text. Jesus “knows” those who are born again (see Galatians 4:6 and 9). Jesus knows those who have received the Spirit (see Romans 8:5-17). So for Him to say “I NEVER knew you” is to say “You were never born of God.” That’s why we read in Romans 8:29-30 that “*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined...and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom he called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*”
 - b. The second text that is helpful to explain what removing oneself from “faith” is James chapter 2. Because at this point we need to ask: “What sort of faith are they departing from?” Is all faith saving faith? Or is there a kind of faith that men can have but not be truly born again and saved? James tells us of three different kinds of faith that do not save. It seems clear that a “departure from the faith” would mean a decision to no longer identify oneself with Christ and His Gospel.

The sort of people that do that and will do that en masse at the end of the age are those who have:

1. A Dead Faith (2:17)

“Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”

2. A Demonic Faith (2:19)

“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder.”

3. A Useless Faith (2:20)

“But are you willing to recognize you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

- c. The point is this: there are many in our midst now, as were in James’ midst and as will be in the midst of the end-time church, that will have a faith that is categorically dead, demonic and useless. *That is, a faith that gets them affiliated with the covenantal community but not in covenant with God.* And a departure from the faith, as we read in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 is one in which people with this sort of empty allegiance to Jesus chose to depart from Him once they are pressured and tested.

3. **Secondly, the Bible explains how *WITHIN* the covenantal community there are those who are no *OF* the covenantal community.** This is similar to the last point but distinct. The dead faith of James chapter 2 and the empty profession of Matthew 7 result in episodes like Judas’ departure from the group on the eve of the crucifixion to betray Jesus. That is, there are people in our communities who have not been born again but who have a profound ability to fake it. That’s why John writes to saints in Ephesus warning them of those who “went out FROM us but who were not OF us.” (1 John 2:19) He calls them “antichrists” and false teachers. If antichrists and false teachers can have fellowship with the saints without being detected for sometime, is it not strange to think that there will be false believers who profess but who do not believe?

4. **And thirdly, a survey through the book of Hebrews** would lead us to the same conclusions that can be drawn from passages like 1 John 2:19, Matthew 7:21-23, James 2:17, 19 and 22; that falling away is a judgment on the unrepentant and the unbelieving not on the repentant and they who have faith. Within the community to whom the author was writing were those who were not OF the community. And where the distinction can be seen is in the word “faith.” Throughout the book the author is pleading with those within the community but not OF the community of faith to forsake

everything else but Christ and Christ alone. That's why in chapter 3 we read a discourse on falling away (beginning in verse 12) explaining how "wicked" and "unbelieving" people were "partaking" of the community but not of Christ. To make the point clear the author draws a comparison from the Exodus story of those who left Egypt but died in the wilderness and those within the wicked and unbelieving people in their own community: they did not have faith. That is, they died in their sins in the desert halfway between Egypt and Canaan and so too will these die in their sins without every reaching the destination of Christ and the "city whose maker is God." The warnings in Hebrews are not to sincere born again Christians but to those who, like the wilderness wanderers before them, are aimlessly wandering in the midst of the covenantal community without saving faith. That's why every warning about apostasy in the book is either preceded or concluded with a word concerning the authenticity of the faith of the regenerate.

"...BUT beloved, we are CONVINCED of BETTER things concerning YOU, and things that accompany SALVATION though we are speaking in THIS WAY." (Hebrews 6:9)

"...BUT WE are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who HAVE FAITH to the PRESERVING OF THE SOUL." (Hebrews 10:39)

E. ***The Exegetical Perspective from 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17***

1. I want to suggest that **2 Thessalonians 2:13 is the key** to understanding this issue of the falling away within the context of this chapter.

"But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13).

2. Before getting into the text, let's embrace the surrounding ideas. As with all passages, the weight and substance of this verse is most profoundly beheld and experienced once the context is properly understood.
 - a. Paul has just explained the key events surrounding "the Day of the Lord." He explained how at the end of the age, before the rapture two things must occur: "the man of sin" must emerge and "the great falling away" *must come first*.
 - b. He then goes on to say that when these events transpire on the global scene multitudes will be swallowed up in a great delusion following the "man of sin" (antichrist) as though he were God.

- c. And because they do not “love the truth” God will give them over to a “strong delusion” to believe the lie to then be condemned to destruction forever for having never “received the love of the truth.” That is the context of this passage.
3. The “Falling Away” that the apostle is referring to in verse 3 is one that looks like untold multitudes (billions) being (1) deceived by Antichrist’s lying signs and wonders, (2) emboldened to reject truth and (3) deluded and destroyed by a divine judgment that sends them to hell forever. THAT is the Falling Away. They who fall away are they who all along “did not receive the love of the truth” (v. 10) and who “took pleasure in wickedness” (v. 12). And in verse 13 we see the apostle draw a very deliberate and a very obvious distinction between the believers in Thessalonica and those who God sends a delusion upon and condemns. That contrast and that distinction is indicated and signified by the statement **“But we should always give thanks for you...”** This distinction is one that we will develop in a moment.
4. What is clear from the first 12 verses is that Paul’s description of the person that falls away is he who is **“deceived”**, **“wicked”**, **“condemned”** and **“not receiving the love of the truth.”** That much is clear. Paul says very unambiguously that the one who falls is not he who stands by faith in the Son of God but he who stands with a shallow and unregenerate profession to a faith that is ultimately equated with having “never received the love of the truth.” These are important points to take into consideration.
5. Now let’s explore the significance of verse 13

“But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13).

- a. The words “but” and “for you” are so important because, as has been stated, Paul is drawing a contrast; a very helpful contrast; and a contrast that settles the debate over who are the people that are falling away. He’s saying “Multitudes will depart from the faith and run into apostasy and eternal punishment. *But you are not of they who do.*”
- b. And, he says, that is the precise reason why we are bound, constrained and indebted to God to celebrate Him and what He has done. Paul’s thanksgiving is directly related to His sovereign saving of those who would otherwise go with the masses into destruction. We MUST acknowledge the distinction that Paul is making! “There will be masses that are deceived, condemned as wicked and sent to hell. But you O precious saints are not counted among them! And there is a reason why: God has chosen you by sanctifying you and giving the gift of saving faith so that you would believe the truth.”

- c. He says “stability at the end is found in the knowledge of what God has done “in the beginning.”” In other words, we have courage to face the intensity of the Day of the Lord events by virtue of our confidence in God’s choosing of us to salvation before we were even breathing. Paul has a habit of rejoicing in the fact that before the foundation of the world God made a decision to *actually save* people from eternal destruction. He didn’t just make a decision to make people savable and allow them to come to Him; no, Paul says that He actually saves them. Not only are we “saved” from hell, but are saved from being deceived by Antichrist and swallowed up in divine judgment because of it.

- b. Here is where the rubber meets the road on a number of levels. **How are we saved?** This will impact the way we view the apostasy (and the entire faith for that matter!). Paul tells of a 4-fold salvation of saints from hell AND from the apostasy.
 1. **Chosen:** That is, He elected us. He looked out over the condemned sea of humanity after the Fall and decreed the redemption of specific individuals. Note the contrast between the “chosen” in verses 13-17 and the “condemned” in verses 6-12.

“As many as were ordained to eternal life, believed” (Acts 13:48).
 2. **To Salvation:** His election had an end in mind. It wasn’t the possibility and opportunity for salvation but the actuality of salvation. His decree actually saved us. “He chose us for salvation” is so vastly different than simply “He chose us.” The “to salvation” indicates the design behind the election and the nature of it. Note the contrast between “salvation” in verses 13-17 and “condemnation” in verses 6-12.
 3. **Through sanctification of the Spirit:** And here we see the means by which the election and the salvation are appropriated: by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. The word “sanctified” in the past tense occurs more in the New Testament than “sanctification” in the ongoing sense. Meaning, the NT puts more of an emphasis on the immediate sanctification of a person at the new birth than on the ongoing sanctification progressively. Both are valid and real. But the point is this: The Holy Spirit sanctifies individuals immediately and permanently at regeneration. *This is the sole cause and ground of our salvation – the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.* For, we “must be born again.” Note the contrast between the “sanctified” in verses 13-17 and the “wicked” in verses 6-12.

4. **Through belief in the Truth:** Again we see the means by which election and salvation. This belief in the truth is what sets apart from those who “believe the lie” and are “wicked” and “deceived.” This is called “faith;” saving faith. It’s the kind that can only be given; the kind that is God’s prerogative to give (see Phil. 1:29 and Eph. 2:9-10). God cleanses hearts and saves people by giving the gift of saving faith. Faith is not a mental agreement or an intellectual stance but a supernatural virtue that is bestowed on the elect by God. Note the contrast between “belief in the truth” in verses 13-17 and “believe the lie” in verses 6-12.

“And God, who knows the heart [how wicked and rebellious it is], bore witness to them [Gentiles], GIVING them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us [Jews]; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts BY faith.”

- c. The point Paul is making in this 4-fold explanation of why he is bound to rejoice in God is that if it weren’t for God’s sovereign saving of individuals all would wander into destruction. The only reason why the saints do not is because they have been elected by the Father, redeemed by the blood of the Son and regenerated and sealed by the Holy Spirit.
- d. A.W. Pink says that there are ‘three things here which deserve special attention:’
 1. **‘First,** the fact that we are expressly told that God’s elect are “**chosen to salvation.**” Language could not be more explicit. How summarily do these words dispose of the sophistries and equivocations of all who would make election refer to nothing but external privileges or rank in service! It is to “salvation” itself that God hath chosen us.
 2. **Second,** we are warned here that election unto salvation does not disregard the use of appropriate means: salvation is reached through “sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.” It is not true that because God has chosen a certain one to salvation that he will be saved willy-nilly [regardless], whether he believes or not: nowhere do the Scriptures so represent it. The same God who predestined the end also appointed the means; the same God who “chose unto salvation” decreed that His purpose should be realized through the work of the Spirit and belief of the truth.

¹ A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*

3. **Third**, that God has chosen us unto salvation is a profound cause for fervent praise. Note how strongly the Apostle expresses *this*-“we are bound to give thanks *always* to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, *because* God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation,” etc. Instead of shrinking back in horror from the doctrine of predestination, the believer, when he sees this blessed truth as it is unfolded in the Word, discovers a ground for gratitude and thanksgiving such as nothing else affords, save the unspeakable gift of the Redeemer Himself.’

6. In **verse 14** we read that:

“It was FOR THIS that He CALLED you through our Gospel, that YOU may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

 - a. “For this”? For what? Paul is saying that it was this end that was in mind when God called us effectually. This word “call” is much different than “invite.” All are invited to come with a genuine invitation. But the problem is, not one human being wants to come and is angered by even the invitation. So God effectually calls people by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.
 - b. YOU who were called were called for the purpose of YOU gaining Christ. Those who fall away gain the condemnation and judgment of Christ.

7. In **verse 15** we read an exhortation to “stand firm” in all that has been communicated to them by Paul. This “stand firm” is in DIRECT CONTRAST to “stand apart from” in verse 3.

8. In **verses 16-17** we read a prayer. Paul is praying for the believers who are being “troubled” and “disturbed” by all of the controversy and confusion and anxiety surrounding this issue of the Day of the Lord and the Falling Away. For them he prays a very extraordinary prayer.
 - a. First he asks that the God who “loved us” and has “given us eternal comfort/consolation” and “good hope BY grace” would comfort hearts. What a beautiful contrast between the condemnation and judgment on those who did not receive the love of the truth! The ones who received the love of the truth at salvation received eternal comfort. And because of that, Paul asks for an increase. What a contrast between eternal comfort and eternal condemnation!
 - b. Secondly he asks for their hearts to be “strengthened.” That is, would weak hearts confused and burdened by anxiety be filled with divine life to face anything, including the Day of the Lord, with confidence, boldness and joy.

9. Note all the contrasts in the chapter. They articulate what the falling away is and who falls:
 - a. There are those who “stand apart from Christ” (v3) and those who “stand firm in Christ” (v15)
 - b. There are those who are “deceived” (v10) and those who “love the truth” (v10, 13)
 - c. There are those who receive a God given “delusion” (v11) and those who receive a God given “belief in the truth” (v 13)
 - d. There are those who “perish” (v10) and those who are “saved” (v13)
 - e. There are the “wicked” (v10, 12) and the “beloved” (v13)
 - f. There are those who are “condemned” (v12) and those who are “elected” (v13)
 - g. There are those who are defiled (v4-12) and those who are “sanctified” (13)
 - h. There are those who follow antichrist (v4-12) and those who follow Jesus (v13-17)
10. There isn’t one ounce of evidence in the text that would suggest that Paul has born again believers in mind here when he says “stand apart from Christ” in verse 3. The scathing way he speaks about the wicked who side with Antichrist and who are consequently condemned, the way he speaks the redeemed and the way he prays for them indicates without ambiguity that Paul understood the falling away, or better stated, *standing apart* from Jesus in the last days to be a judgment on false believers more than a testing and breaking of the true. If there were one statement or even one word in the text that hinted at the fact that these were the regenerate believers who were falling away then I would say we shouldn’t be that bold about this. But since there is not, we must be bold about it: The falling away is about the exposing of the false not the breaking of the true.
11. Lastly, as a qualifier for those who can’t buy the argument yet: Considering the severity of “falling away into eternal punishment,” wouldn’t you think that Paul would give some sort of theological and pastoral insight into the “regenerate, justified and sanctified believer falling away” if that’s what he meant? *If it is possible* it is one of the biggest surprises in the NT because of the abundant number of clear statements concerning the permanency of regeneration and justification. And because there isn’t one statement that explains how someone who is born of the Spirit and justified by grace because of

the death of Jesus can fall away to eternal punishment, I find it hard to believe that this is what Paul meant by falling away.

F. **The Historical Perspective**

1. Throughout history there have been a dozen or so very significant generations that indicated a transition in God's redemptive purposes. In all of them we find that the transition brought about a "falling away." That is to say that when the moment of transition downshifted into intensity, the pressure caused multitudes of those who were WITHIN the covenantal community to depart FROM the covenantal community. Time and space elude us here to explore them all in detail. But consider a few: (1) Moses and the Wilderness Wanderers, (2) Elijah's Ministry, (3) the Exilic Prophet's Ministry and (4) Jesus' First Coming.
2. **Moses and the Wilderness Wanderers** – As I mentioned before the warnings in the book of Hebrews are all founded upon the Old Testament presupposition that there can be people IN the collection of people of God who are not OF the people of God. All the warnings of the book are crafted to be understood contextually with the parallel account of the wilderness wanderings. That is, that a mass of people responded to the word of the Lord in some sense of the word "respond" enough to get out of Egypt and get out into the wilderness. And there, because "faith was not mixed with the word" the people wandered and masses died without receiving the promise of Canaan. They heard the word to leave Egypt, they responded to the word, they left, they went to the desert, they associated with the people of the Covenant, they were there when the Covenant was instated and cut and they called themselves Hebrews. But the witness from heaven over their lives, according to Numbers and according to the book of Hebrews was that many of these people were not of the covenant and ended up dying in their sins having never entered into relationship with God. What we see in the wilderness for those tragic and even comical decades was that apostasy is not when sincere people born of the Spirit walk away and lose their salvation but when those who had never partaken decide to depart from the middle ground into full blown rebellion.
3. **Elijah's Ministry** – Elijah is quite profound in that he is addressing a nation that had just come out of the richest generation on so many levels. They were living in the spiritual wealth of the Davidic Empire that sowed seeds of true encounter, revival and reality into the foundations of the nation. After Solomon (David's Son) civil war broke out and the nation was divided in two. Elijah is ministering in that divided nation. The pinnacle of his ministry was clearly the showdown with the prophets of Baal. His message to the nation then was "How long will you waver between two opinions?!" In other words, "How long are you going to be IN the covenantal family but not OF it?! If you do not make a decision to get out of the gauntlet you will die in your sins." My intention here is not to speculate as to whether there was a "departing" or a "turning" but to say that Elijah was dealing with a present tense apostasy. In that, he was confronting a people

who had no problem having a form of godliness but denying its power. We read in Romans 9 that the only reason why Elijah didn't go wayward with the rest of the nation is because "according to the election of grace" God "reserved 7,000 for" Himself. Again the emphasis in 2 Kings and Romans 9 is on the fact that there are people IN the covenantal community who are not OF it. There are those who are professing but who are not truly of God.

4. ***The Exilic Prophet's Ministry*** – One of the clearest examples of all the exilic prophets is Jeremiah. The reason why is because Jeremiah was ministering in the context of a nationwide revival that eclipsed all other national revivals. Under Josiah the "entire nation turned to the Lord." 2 Chronicles attests to the magnitude of the phenomenon with striking words. After cleansing the countryside of all idolatry and shrines, after reinstating Temple worship and the feasts, and after the nation comes before God to acknowledge their in and the veracity of the covenant a teenage prophet emerges onto the scene with a message that the move of God is real but the transformation is shallow, fleeting and defiled. A year into the revival (the 13th year of Josiah's reign) Jeremiah says that the nation is on the eve of her greatest devastation in her entire history. And yet the nation was in the Temple, attending feasts, obeying the Law and meeting the external requirements of religious duty. But at the end of the season the nation was utterly destroyed in a two decade military siege that resulted in the destruction of the Temple and captivity of the entire nation. Jeremiah records no signs of repentance or conversion within the people of God and dies in exile himself. Jeremiah is but one example of the fact that WITHIN the covenantal community there were those who were not OF the covenantal community. Those who did not "depart" and "apostatize" were those like Daniel and Ezekiel who Paul later tells us were reserved by God's sovereign election.
5. ***Jesus' First Coming*** – Both ironically and tragically, Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the welcoming praise of the masses singing "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord;" the very thing that He said in Matthew 23:39 that was required for His return. The same people who were welcoming Him into the city are subsequently rebuked for not responding appropriately to the season that they were in (see Mark 11:1-17) and end up, just hours later the next day, shouting violently "Crucify Him!" and "Give us Barabbas!" Throughout His ministry Jesus was dealing with people IN the fold who were not OF the fold. John's Gospel brings this out most conspicuously with passages like the mass "apostasy" from Jesus in John 6 after He commands that they eat His flesh and drink His blood or like in John 10 when He says that they don't hear His words because they are not "His sheep." Clearly there was a significant apostasy in the generation of Jesus' first coming. He once fed 5,000 men, which means that there were in all likelihood upwards of 20,000 people present if women and children were there. And yet after the resurrection only a fraction was left in the upper room.

IV. SUMMARY OF THE SUBJECT OF APOSTASY AND THE END-TIME DEPARTURE

- A. There are three observations that I believe we can make to form some sort of summation:
1. If we look at the text in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 there is no contextual or exegetical evidence that Paul has born again Thessalonians or any born again Christians in mind when he uses the term “departure.” His deliberate contrast of those who are condemned and those who are saved by election is clear and striking. If the text is clear on one thing it’s that those who fall are they who never loved truth, loved wickedness and who deserve eternal punishment for the horrendous level of perversion that they engaged in. Moreover, it seems clear from the text that “salvation by sovereign election” is both a legitimate Biblical category AND one that is useful in the mind of the apostle to comfort a community perplexed by the Day of the Lord implications. Exegetically we cannot project the notion that regenerate and justified believers can “lose their salvation” onto the text. It is clearly a distortion. I use the word distortion because there isn’t a shred of evidence that gives us permission to say so. Paul says that salvation is from the Lord before time implying that if anyone were going to “lose” anyone’s salvation, it would be Jesus. We didn’t save us, He did. We MUST take that into account when expositing this text contextually.
 2. If we look at the text theologically to discern whether a born again believer can, under the pressure of the Day of the Lord events, lose their salvation, the evidence is slim. Most of the ammunition used by those who affirm this idea is found in the book of Hebrews. The glaring problem with this is that each warning of “falling away” is either preceded or followed up by a statement of assurance concerning the perseverance of the regenerate. Theologically speaking, a falling away is coming, just like those that have come. But the important distinction that we must make is that those who fall are not those who have been born of the Spirit and justified by God. Otherwise God must annul what He said, destroy what He regenerated and condemn what He justified by grace apart from works in the first place making the doctrine of “our union with Christ” nothing more than a theological hyperbole that has no bearing of significance in this age. Both Testaments declare that in the New Covenant regeneration, justification and union are all permanent and that that guarantees God will preserve and that he or she will persevere. That is the two-fold point here: God preserves the justified and regenerate and the justified and regenerate persevere.

3. If we consider the subject of apostasy on a historic level, are greatest examples are not of saints falling but of fakes being exposed. That's why the message to warn and test is so necessary. Because if we fail to test the authenticity of our communities by sharp words of warning and rebuke for wavering we set our communities up to think of themselves as safe when they may in fact be very far from safe. History tells us that God exposes that which is fraud with pressure and that the very same pressure *invariably and without fail produces* perseverance in the redeemed. That was Paul's point in Romans 5: tribulation absolutely and invariably produces perseverance in the regenerate.
- B. In view of these three perspective: (1) We must warn people in the church and out of the church of the coming hour when pressure will be so intensified that many will depart from their association with the covenantal community. And so we are to (2) warn them unto salvation and preparation. The remedy for apostasy is, as the writer of Hebrews says, faith in Christ. That is the pinnacle of eschatological preparation. So in some cases we are to (3) blow the trumpet that causes trembling and fear in a provocative way and in other cases (4) give words of encouragement to the fearful sheep that the days ahead will not destroy the work that God has wrought in us.
- C. The takeaway point is this: the falling away at the end of the age isn't about believers going to hell because they couldn't handle the pressure or because the intensity of the events surprised them. It's about the testing and the exposing of that which is not authentic and born of the Spirit. The task of the preacher and the prophet and the evangelist is to do the same: test and expose that which is not authentic and born of the Spirit knowing with the author of Hebrews that when God "shakes everything that can be shaken" what has been born of the Spirit and what is born of the Kingdom will remain by virtue of the fact that we have been translated into "a kingdom which **cannot be shaken.**" (see chapter 12)