

# The Falling Away

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The apostle Paul seems to have had a penchant for being misunderstood in his writings. Peter makes note of this when he describes Paul's epistles as containing "some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (II Peter 3:16).

This certainly happened—and continues to happen—in relation to Paul's writings on law and grace, as well as on other doctrines. In I Corinthians, he wrote powerfully against tolerating sin and the necessity of removing immorality from the congregation. Later, he had to write II Corinthians to ensure that the actions of the congregation did not end up doing permanent spiritual harm to the offender.

Similarly, Paul penned II Thessalonians because some of the brethren had misunderstood his words in his previous letter about the time of the end. Some members began to take the wrong path, so he wrote to the congregation again, in part to give the members some clarity about what would happen before Jesus Christ's return. Chapter 2 gives several details of what must take place before the Day of the Lord:

Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. . . . For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (II Thessalonians 2:3-4, 7-12)

Years ago, verses 3-4 caught the attention of many who were exiting the Worldwide Church of God because these verses appeared as though they were being fulfilled. Some even went so far as to say that the Pastor General at the time was the man of sin due to his wholesale assault on God's law. They said that with his teaching, he was showing himself to be above God.

However, later in the prophecy, the man of sin—the lawless one—is destroyed with the brightness of Christ's coming, an event that obviously did not happen to that Pastor General. While a great deal of "unrighteous deception" occurred, no one performed any "signs and wonders." At best, we can say that what happened then was a *type* of the falling away. It fit this pattern but did not really fulfill what Paul foretold.

This passage outlines a basic sequence of events: Christ's return is preceded by the appearance of the man of sin, who is preceded by the "falling away." As we look forward to that Day of both darkness

and light, we should watch for this falling away to help us stay focused on the surety of Christ's coming.

## **Apostasy**

We are immediately presented with a challenge, however, because the Bible contains few supporting scriptures to help us understand exactly what Paul means. The Greek word translated as “falling away” is *apostasia*, which *Strong's Greek Dictionary* defines as “defection from truth.” This word is used in only one other place:

When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. (Acts 21:19-21)

The word *apostasia* is found in verse 21, in the mention of “forsak[ing] Moses.” A rumor was circulating that Paul was teaching people to fall away from—to defect from—the truth revealed through Moses, which underscores Peter's observation about how easily Paul's teachings could be misunderstood. Acts 21 gives us a second reference for the usage of *apostasia*, but it tells us little about what Paul had in mind when he warned of *the* falling away—a specific and definitive falling away.

A closely-related form of this word is *apostasion*, which means “separation.” In the three places it is used, it is translated as “a certificate of divorce” (Matthew 5:31; 19:7; Mark 10:4). In that related form as well, we see the concepts of falling away, forsaking, and defecting.

*Apostasia* is also found in four places in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (Joshua 22:22; II Chronicles 29:19; 33:19; Jeremiah 2:19). In each case, the predominate theme is a king (or the whole nation of Israel) rebelling against—forsaking—God and turning to an alien belief system. Applying that to the prophesied “falling away,” we can understand that the truth forsaken in the end times is not truth as an abstract concept but truth that relates to God.

## **What is the Prophecy's Scope?**

A major question about II Thessalonians 2 is the scope of the described events. As mentioned earlier, one interpretation is that it is a localized occurrence, in the sense of it happening just within the “little flock”—the church. A second interpretation is that since “the falling away” contains the definite article, it refers to a unique event in man's history, far greater than anything that has happened before. In contrast, the church has had periods of strength and weakness all throughout its history—it goes through cycles of rallying around truth and then gradually letting it slip. This second, universal interpretation is a better fit because, when we look at the whole passage, the events and personalities are worldwide in scope.

Remember, this falling away sets the stage for the man of sin, who will have tremendous influence over mankind. Paul is not writing about apostasy in a small group of people that will give rise to an international personality, but an event on the world scene that creates the right environment to catapult this figure, backed by the power of Satan, to the heights of power.

Paul, then, is letting the church know that it does not have to be concerned about missing the end time. The events leading up to the Day of the Lord will be unmistakable to those with eyes to see. What will happen will affect the whole world, even though the world will not grasp the spiritual significance.

In this regard, a falling away is taking place right now. Whether it turns out to be *the* falling away remains to be seen. Right now, though, we are witnessing a steady defection from the basic principles of the Bible, away from what we call the Judeo-Christian ethic. This is not brand new, but it is picking up speed. We need to be reminded of it because it can have a detrimental effect on us.

Apostasy is a defection from truth—a forsaking of one spiritual approach in favor of another. In the Old Testament, many of the kings and eventually the whole nation of Israel rebelled against God and chose opposing belief systems. We are seeing the same thing today, but at times, it is harder to recognize because we are accustomed to it, and it is not happening overnight. In the books of Kings and Chronicles, we can read the record of a given king who turned away from God and served the Baals, and the foolishness sounds quick and casual because we are reading a summary. But when a falling away happens around us, perhaps even beginning before we were born, it is easy for our minds to adjust to the point that we almost forget the continuing rebellion against God and His way.

### **Truth Forsaken**

In II Thessalonians 2, Paul leaves out some significant details. For example, in verse 10, he writes of the love of the truth, but he does not specify *which* truth he has in view. In verse 11, he speaks of believing “the lie,” but fails to identify it. He also mentions not believing the truth in verse 12 but provides no specifics.

The truth to which he refers does not have to indicate the doctrines that only the church of God understands. It could be as common as the truth that there is a God. The Creator gave the nation of Israel tremendous truth, truth His people could grasp even without the Holy Spirit. Likewise, He has given all mankind truth for which it is accountable, which is why Paul writes that humanity is without excuse (Romans 1:20). In Romans 1:18, he mentions men suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, and the truth under discussion is the simple truth that a Creator God exists, and He requires mankind’s worship.

However, today we are witnessing a defection from even this basic reality. As mankind’s knowledge has increased, he has misused it to deny the existence of a Creator. The theory of evolution functions as a prop so people do not have to face this reality. Evolution—now at the core of Western culture—is blindly accepted but rarely “proved” individually. Even so, the Western world has subscribed to it so extensively that a person will not be taken seriously if he speaks of Creation.

A second basic truth that is being forsaken is that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. The apostle John gives this as an attribute of those who are “anti-Christ,” and he uses the existence of such beliefs as proof that it was already the last hour (see I John 4:1-3). We are seeing people divorce themselves from this truth as well. People will say that Jesus existed, but that He was not God but a created being, that He was just a prophet, or that He later settled down with Mary Magdalene and had children. Islam declares that the very idea of God having a Son is blasphemous. Thus, the basic truth about the nature of God—the Father and the Son—is not only being forsaken in the West, but it is also a cause for increasing persecution.

The number of those who hold even these basic truths is declining in the United States, both as a percentage of the population as well as the total number. The biggest declines are in the numbers of Catholics and mainline Protestants, but even the evangelicals' numbers are declining. On the other hand, the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation—the “nones”—is increasing, and now nearly one-fifth of Americans who were raised with a religion now profess to have none.

In *Survey: Christians Are Not Spreading the Gospel* (November 30, 2017), pollster George Barna observes:

Given the dominant influence on peoples' decision to embrace Christ [i.e. the environment during one's youth], the future is not promising for Christianity unless current patterns change. The adults who are of parenting age are part of the generation that is least likely to be born again, suggesting that the existing and coming segments of children in America are also less likely to embrace the gospel.

Even as the number of “nones” is swelling, the number of Americans with non-Christian beliefs, such as Islam and Hinduism, is also growing. Though the relative numbers are smaller, Wicca and unabashed Satanism are surging. More sobering still is that the U.S. is the most “Christian” of all the nations of Israel. The other Israelitish nations have fallen away even more. In Britain, more people attend mosques each week than churches. We are seeing a falling away from—a forsaking of—even basic truth and a ready acceptance of just about anything else.

Even among those who still profess a belief in the Father and the Son, such belief is becoming so anemic that it is not translating into everyday life. Whereas nominal Christianity used to be a bulwark against obvious immorality, now it is succumbing to fluid definitions of murder, marriage, stealing, and lying. It is operating under increasingly shallow ideas of righteousness, grace, love, and obligation. Mainstream Catholics and Protestants may retain their professions of faith, but in practical terms, they are defecting from what truth they formerly held.

### **Pressure on the Church**

Scripture indicates just how far this defection goes. In three places, the Bible says that when Christ returns, people will *mourn* when they see the One from whom they have distanced themselves and will then be opposing (Matthew 24:30; Zechariah 12:10; Revelation 1:7). In Revelation 1:7, John says that every race or clan will be dismayed—apparently including most physical Israelites—because the falling away will be so widespread. The falling away does not have to include every person, but as a generality, the creation will defect from its Creator, leading to a ready support of a man who exalts himself above God.

Even though the scope of II Thessalonians 2 is more indicative of the world than the church, we can be sure that this trend will still put pressure on us. The spirit of the age guides the world, but it also always influences the church to some degree. As one evangelist once said, “If it is in the world, it is in the church.” Peter gives us advance warning:

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen. (II Peter 3:17-18)

This is the conclusion to a warning that in the last days there will be scoffers, walking according to their own lusts, and denying the surety of Christ's return. This, too, indicates a defection from once-held truth. Peter says that, since we are warned about these things, we must stand vigilant against them. He warns against falling from our steadfastness or losing our spiritual stability. Obviously, Peter did not believe what has come to be known as the Doctrine of Eternal Security, and there is good reason for his warning.

The danger for us is probably not a ready acceptance of atheism, nor a sudden sprint into one of the rising belief systems. The greater threat is the slow and gradual one, the peril of neglect, of apathy, of little compromises that set the stage for larger defections. Without a steady walk with God and a consistent practice of His Word, we may forsake the rare understanding that we have been given in favor of the wisdom of men and the opinions of the day. Even now in corners of the church of God, baptized members shrug at things that the Creator God calls abominations. These viewpoints do not arise from the Word of God, but from its dismissal, as the ideas of the age fill in the cracks little by little.

True Christians believe that this present world will come to an end when Christ returns. God has a superior way of life for mankind, and that way is open now to those whom He has called in this age. However, when He returns, the door closes for us. Those who have a love of the truth will be on the victorious side, and those who do not will be condemned. They will have had their pleasure in unrighteousness, and God will give them over to what they have been seeking all along.

In verse 18, Peter counsels us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. If He is the desire of our hearts, we will seek Him, and He will be our reward. If the world is what we find attractive, we will love the world and perish with it.

God does not direct us to arrest the falling away that is taking place in the world but to make sure we do not let things slip in *our* lives. We are urgently warned to take heed that no one deceives us (Matthew 24:4), to take care lest we be weighed down by the cares of this life (Luke 21:34), and to take heed lest we fall (I Corinthians 10:12), so that the day of Christ's return will be a day of victory for us rather than a day of condemnation.