

The Falling Away: Has It Happened?

By [Gary Stearman](#)

As we watch the relentless downward spiral of global society, we recall that biblical prophecy states that the latter days would be marked by a collapse of faith, morality and ethics. The question we're now asking ourselves is simple: Have we gone beyond the point of no return, or will there be spiritual revival?

No one can really answer this question. God's plans are His own. But our clear perception in the light of biblical prophecy is that we've entered the latter days. Israel is back in the Holy Land, embroiled in an international conflict that precisely matches the Scriptural prophecies. Everywhere, dark occultic and demonic schemes are growing in prominence. Evil genetic experimentation is now a reality. Morality is overwhelmed by shameless behavior. Many Christian writers have illuminated these developments for years.

But for Christians, there is one prophecy that is at the top of the list. It tells us that prior to the Tribulation, something called "a falling away" must come. In the light of many other prophetic developments, this event seems to be in the process of happening at the present time. But we must ask: Is this really true, and how will we know when it has reached completion. In other words, how much worse must things get before Paul's prophecy is fulfilled?

As we examine the meaning of the term above, we would first note that it seems to be describing a latter-day spiritual collapse. A few months after sending his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul sent them a second one. It was an update and clarification of that first epistle, which had carefully laid out the doctrine pertaining to the rapture of the church. And it dealt with a specific misunderstanding that had been spawned by deceptive false teachers in the interim period.

Certain "teachers" had entered congregations and had begun to point to the ongoing Roman persecution of Jews and Christians, coupled with a developing revolutionary undercurrent, as being prophetically significant. They taught that the Day of the Lord had already arrived. They were apparently persuading believers that the Tribulation had by that time begun, and that they were currently going through it.

Paul vigorously refuted this mistaken idea, while supporting his original statement that the rapture would come before the Day of the Lord. We believe that this "Day" will begin with seven horrific years of catastrophe.

Like Paul and his early followers, we too live in an increasingly tumultuous world. The constant downpour of new and dramatic anti-Christian developments is a daily reality. The state of Israel has set the stage for a procession of prophetic fulfillments. Bible-believing Christians of our era have honed their anticipation to a fine edge. For decades, we have been searching the Scriptures under the conviction that through them, the Lord will speak words of confidence, comfort and hope in a world that is spinning out of

control.

But in a repeat of the way it happened in Paul's day, there is now an increasing undercurrent of negative teaching, in which some Bible expositors are suggesting that the Day of the Lord will come while Christians are still on the Earth. In fact, many of them are presenting what they interpret as "evidence" of this fact. In other words, the same problem of interpretation that plagued early Christians is alive and well to this day.

Those of us who believe in a pretribulation rapture also live in the moment-by-moment expectation that our "blessed hope" will be realized during our lifetimes. We speak, of course, of our Lord's promise to come and personally escort us home, as we experience rapture and resurrection. The timing of this event will be a total surprise! This is the doctrine of imminency, taught with great clarity by the Apostle Paul. He believed it, and taught the churches of his own day to live in the light of this blessed expectation ... awaiting the Lord's arrival ... which they all believed could come at any moment:

"16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (I Thess. 4:16,17).

This was followed by Paul's unequivocal statement that Christians won't experience God's coming judgment of planet Earth: "9 For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thess. 5:9).

"A Falling Away"

Amazingly, these and other assurances written in First Thessalonians weren't enough for the believers in Thessalonica. Some of them were still being persuaded that the wrath of God had already begun.

In the process of writing his second letter of clarification, Paul gave them (and us) a remarkable clue as to the sequence of events that would come before the Tribulation. Its opening statement is absolutely clear:

"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" (II Thess. 2:1-3).

The terms of Paul's clarification are crystal clear. Here, he acknowledges that some of his contemporaries believed that the Day of the Lord (here called "the day of Christ") has already arrived. Because of false prophecy, mistaken preaching or forged letters, they had become convinced that God's wrath had fallen upon the world.

At the time this letter was written (in the first century, around AD 51), the reign of

Roman Emperor Claudius was nearing its end, marked by debauchery, political deceit and finally, the assassination that brought Nero to power. Claudius had persecuted the Jews, who had previously felt safe in the empire. Both Jews and Christians were shocked and repulsed by increasing debauchery in the imperial household.

Furthermore, Claudius had appointed Herod Agrippa II as king of Chalcis. This dark king was married to his own sister, Bernice. This strange couple had become the focus of gossip throughout the empire. To make matters worse, Agrippa controlled politics and finances at the Temple in Jerusalem. And its priests had long since been corrupted by their unholy political alliance with both Roman and Herodian governance. Jerusalem, itself, had fallen into utter corruption.

Looking at these and other events, it would have been easy to conclude that the vaunted stability of the Roman government was rapidly disappearing. It was being replaced by unscrupulous madmen creating the general conception that danger lurked on every hand. (Nero would soon be in power). The Jewish priesthood was irreversibly corrupt, suggesting that God's judgment could be near.

Yet, with all this upheaval taking place, Paul still assured the early church that the event that he called "a falling away" had yet to happen. This term is a translation of the Greek apostasia, generally regarded as signifying apostasy from the faith.

We know with historical certainty that this mysterious "falling away" didn't happen throughout the first century. This period marked the beginning and building of the church, not its demise.

And even throughout the reigns of Nero, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, (AD 54-96) with their infamous and deadly persecutions of the early church, this critical "falling away" didn't occur.

Instead, there followed a continuing shift of power away from Jewish control of the Holy Land. Finally, in AD 135, the emperor Hadrian presided over the total defeat of Jewish resistance. He renamed Jerusalem as "Aelia Capitolina." Israel, he called "Syria Palestina." The diaspora had begun.

During all these events, the "falling away" hadn't occurred. How do we know this? Because Paul wrote that when it came, it would introduce a chain of events. First, the "man of sin" would be revealed to perform the act of standing up in the Holy of Holies of the Jewish Temple, claiming to be God:

"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" (II Thess. 2:4).

It seems almost unnecessary to point out that none of these things has happened yet. The "man of sin" has not presented himself as God, or even "a god." He hasn't enthroned himself in the Temple of God. Nor did he do this in the first century, before the Temple was destroyed in AD 70. After AD 135, Hadrian placed a pagan statue of Jupiter in the

Temple ... in a rebuilt version of the Holy of Holies. And he also placed a statue of himself on horseback standing before this obscene idol. But after a short time, it crumbled into history. Historically, this is as close as we can come to finding an example of Paul's prophecy. From that time to this, no man has ever enthroned himself in the Temple, proclaiming himself as God.

And thus the situation has remained throughout the Church Age.

A Test

As Paul carefully penned Second Thessalonians, he gave the believers there (and the faithful of our own time) a test scenario. It is comprised of a specific set of instructions for the purpose of determining whether or not the Day of the Lord had come. Given this information, no believer would ever again be able to teach that the Tribulation had already begun.

On the other hand, a non-believer, living in the period following the rapture will be able to use Paul's letter to affirm that the Day of the Lord has in fact, begun. It will be a simple matter of observing his predicted scenario and applying a little logic.

It would all commence, he said, with the mysterious "falling away." An immediate question comes to mind. Does the term, "falling away," apply to society at large, or just to the church?

The answer to this question seems simple enough. Those outside the church – the unredeemed – are already in a fallen state. Technically, they are presently apostate in their belief systems. Their only real moral and ethical restraint comes from what little influence they receive from the longstanding cultural traditions of Judeo-Christian teaching.

Societies of the Western world are still deeply influenced by a longstanding Christian ethos. It is faint, to be sure, but still discernable. The believing Church is still a force in society.

The Departure

However, from the prophecy of the seven churches in Revelation, it is well known that the Church Age will conclude in faithlessness ... in growing apostasy. The first of these churches – Ephesus – is the church characterized by Apostolic zeal, as the Gospel is carried to an unbelieving world in the first century after Christ.

The last church – Laodicea – has fallen from the faith, and is in danger of being rejected:

“14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; 15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. 16 So then

because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out

of my mouth. 17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:14-17).

Here, we find the latter-day church, which has come to depend upon its own wealth rather than the power of the Holy Spirit. Technically, it has isolated itself from the central premise and the very reason for the existence of the church: Salvation and the Gospel.

As depicted by one of the Bible’s richest metaphors, Laodicea is in danger of being spat out of the Lord’s mouth! This is the equivalent of being rejected from His body ... the body of Christ. In other words, this church is comprised of unsaved people, posing as devout believers. They have wealth, social power, beautiful buildings and a network of business connections. But they don’t have the Holy Spirit.

This idea is reinforced by the closing words of the Lord to this church. He invites them to come and have fellowship with Him. In the language of the church, this would be communion ... the Lord’s Supper. His invitation to them is to join Him, in other words, to repent and be saved:

Rev. 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

The Door Opens

Immediately following the Lord’s invitation, we arrive at Revelation, Chapter Four, in which we find the metaphor of a door being opened in heaven, and the Apostle John being invited by a heavenly voice to ascend into the heavens, where he receives his amazing apocalyptic Revelation. Many expositors have remarked that this scene is a perfect representation of the rapture.

In other words, we have an affirmation of Paul’s own description of the events that will surround the rapture of the church. The “falling away,” which Paul describes as the delineating marker for the beginning of the Day of the Lord, is identifiable as that time when the majority of the professing church lapses into apostasy.

One could make the case that this has been true several times since the Dark Ages. But it will actually be true in the moment following the departure of the body of Christ – the True Church – from planet Earth. Much of the organized church will remain here after this event, but one thing will radically change. It will be an apostate church that welcomes the social and governmental changes we regard as horrifying. Most of all, they will welcome the Antichrist as the savior of the world:

“6 And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. “8 And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming”(II

Thess. 2:6-8).

The Holy Spirit, whom Paul identifies as the restraining force holding back the “mystery of iniquity,” will accompany the believing church into the heavens:

As Christ’s body of believers is caught up, and the restraint of the Holy Spirit is no longer a factor, Paul’s “falling away” will become an actuality. Then, and only then, can the “man of sin” be revealed.

The numerous Old Testament prophecies about the Day of the Lord will impact the Earth like a string of dominoes, propelling an unprecedented series of catastrophes that will radically alter life on planet Earth.

The “falling away” hasn’t happened yet. But we seem to have arrived at a tipping point, when unbelievers in the church outnumber believers. No man can accurately discern their numbers. But God knows.