

An Exegesis of II Thessalonians 2:11-17

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As mission congregations go, the church at Thessalonica was young. Founded by Paul on the Second Missionary Journey (about 50 A.D.), the congregation could only have been several months to a year old when Paul's letters were written. In their young Christian faith, the Thessalonians had experienced some-difficulties, persecution, mistaken ideas about the Lord's return, and all of the other doubts, fears, and problems that confront Christians who find themselves believing and witnessing to the gospel in a sinful, hostile world. When we see the perseverance, the growth in Christian faith and love, and the mission zeal of this church we marvel at God's grace. The Lord used Paul as His instrument for communicating the Word that the Holy Spirit used to produce such fruits.

In the section of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians before us this afternoon, we find lie and truth, judgement and assurance of salvation standing in stark contrast. Paul discusses in detail:

The Judgement against Truth Haters, Comfort for Truth Receivers

- I. God's Judgement against the Antichrist and those who stubbornly follow his lie. (verse 11-12)
- II. Thanksgiving to God for the election, call, and sanctification of the Thessalonians through the Word of Truth. (verses 13-14)
- III. Encouragement to hold to the Word of Truth. (verse 15)
- IV. Prayer for God's continued blessings on the Thessalonians. (verses 16-17)
- V. Notes on the importance of this section in our teaching and preaching.

I.

A Translation of Verses 11-12:

And because of this God sends them error's working, so that they believe the lie, in order that all be condemned who have not believed the truth but have taken delight in wickedness.

As Paul began in the previous section to shift his reader's attention away from the Man of Lawlessness himself to those who follow him, so he continues in these two verses. Kai indicates he isn't finished speaking about the truth haters of verse 10. To be sure, they are lost because they refused to love the truth, but there is more to it than that. Dia touto, because of this refusal to love the truth, God sends them error's working. Autois properly refers to both the Antichrist and especially here, to those who forsake the truth for his lie. The present tense in pempej is to be taken irrespective of time; the significant point lies in the active use of this verb. This is not mere permission to slide into error ever deeper, as some claim. God actually sends them error's working.

The term energic planes is significant. Paul does not say that God sends them error, some wandering from the truth. Indeed, he couldn't say that. Titus 1:2, Hebrews 6:18 and many other passages of Scripture make clear that God is not the author of error. Satan is the father of lies. The Antichrist is his agent for transmitting lies, and propagating them in the world. Paul's words tell us that God takes the error and uses it for his own just purposes. Such an act of judgement by God is not limited to this passage. For instance, I Samuel 16:14 tells us: "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." Again in I Kings 22:23 we read: "So now the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The Lord has decreed disaster for you." More about the nature of this judgement later. First let us see what God's design and purpose is in it.

Eis to grammatically could be either purpose or result. Since the ina clause in verse 12 seems clearly to be purpose, this eis to may best be translated as intended result. Stronger than simple result but still short of purpose, intended result catches the thought of God's intentional design in sending the operation of error. This intended result is that they believe the lie. The Antichrist's greatest lie—outright untruth—is the denial of justification by faith. On this hang so many other errors. Because the Antichrist and his stubborn followers have hated the truth, God not only permits them to believe the soul destroying lie, He condemns them to that which they wanted. The natural working of error is that it always and ultimately leads souls away from God in time, and if unchecked by the truth, for all eternity. Constant rejection of the truth plunges one into the lie. God sends error's working as a judgement on those who will not love the truth for what it is—God's means of grace. It is clearly God's intent in this judgement described by Paul here, that those who will not love the truth which saves, will not be saved.

That this is God's purpose is emphatically and chillingly stated in verse 12. The ina clause introduces God's purpose in the judgement. The aorist of krinw, normally meaning simply "to judge," is obviously intended here to mean "condemn." God's aim in his judgement is to prevent the salvation of all (pantes) those who not only disbelieve the truth, but take delight in wickedness. Such a thought dashes to pieces any claim of neutrality that we frequently hear in evangelizing the unchurched. Both phrases here refer to the same people, as alla indicates. It is not a case of either disbelieving the truth or taking delight in wickedness. To be an unbeliever means to think well of, approve of, or take delight in failure to keep both tables of God's Will. There is no fence-riding, especially with Satan on the prowl. He would always pull human hearts into his deadly lies and errors. Condemnation is the only outcome for those upon whom God's judgement comes for rejecting His divine grace; indeed, it is God's aim (Is. 6:10, Mt. 13:15, Jn, 12:39f).

This passage of Scripture does not, as some have claimed, refer to God's means of carrying out an election to damnation. God's judgement spoken of here lies properly under the heading of His consequent will, i.e. that by which He judges and condemns all those who reject His grace in Christ Jesus (Jn 3:18). God's antecedent will is that by which He earnestly desires the salvation of all sinners (Jn. 3:16f). The judgement of obduracy spoken of here, although in different terms than the usual "hardening," refers to that judgement God sends on the sinner only after Satan has blinded the human mind and filled the heart with wickedness (II Cor. 4:4, Acts 5:3), and man of his own will has stubbornly rejected the divine grace freely offered in the gospel (Mt. 13:15, 23:27), The fault lies entirely with man.

Paul does not imply here that all those under the Antichrist's authority and influence are automatically in line for the judgement he describes here. Anyone who has served on our parish ministry for long certainly has seen a number of converts from Roman Catholicism. But as one man has said:

By making this solemn declaration (anathematizing justification *sola fide*) at Trent, the papacy demonstrated that it was under God's judgement of obduracy. It had hardened itself against the teaching of Scriptures that "a man is justified by faith apart from observing the Law (Rm. 3:28), a truth reaffirmed by the Reformation.¹

This is strong meat Paul serves up here, to say the least. It becomes a very applicable warning when we remember that what is under discussion here is a persistent refusal to love the truth. It is quite possible to have it, yet not love it—to fail to see it as God's precious treasure to be believed and earnestly contended for. Paul's words call all in the calling of handling and communicating that truth to let it speak to our hearts first, for then we will certainly be drawn to love it dearly by the Holy Spirit. This is a sobering section of the letter. And perhaps because of this, the next section of Paul's letter stands in wonderfully comforting contrast to it. Paul continues in verses 13 and 14 with thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians' election, call and sanctification through the Word of Truth.

II. Translation of Verses 13-14:

But we are obligated to thank God all the time concerning you, brothers loved by the Lord, that God chose you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and faith in the truth, unto which you were called through our gospel, in order that you gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The adversative de opens this section in marked contrast with the former. Everything is quite different for the Christians at Thessalonica, as we shall see. Opheilomen, a present indicative, carries the meaning that Paul, Silas and Timothy feel an inner obligation to thank God, not that they must be coerced to do so. The infinitive following is usual for this verb. The thanksgiving Paul *et al* feel obligated to give to God has some important features. First it is directed to God, whom as he points out in these two verses, is the source of the abundance of grace and blessing they have received. Secondly, it is offered pantote, all the time. Each time Paul thinks of these Thessalonians he is compelled to give thanks. And finally, this thanksgiving is concerning or on account of the Thessalonians (peri). Not only does Paul join his fellow workers in thanking God for all the grace and blessing mentioned in these two verses, no doubt Paul was filled with thanksgiving on account of them for other reasons. In I Thessalonians 1:7-8 we read: “And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.” Paul was thankful both for what God did and was doing for these people, as well as for what God was doing through them.

Paul uses a term for them here with much more comfort and warmth than the simple adelphoi of 1:3, Here they are called brothers loved by the Lord. They are brothers in the love of the truth, unlike Antichrist and those of his ilk. They are loved by the Lord Jesus—a lot far more blessed than those under God's condemnation. Commentators are divided over just how we are to understand oti. Does it introduce the content or object of Paul's thanksgiving, or does it have causal force? While convincing arguments can be made for either, this writer opts for content. Paul is on the verge of recounting the wonderful things God has done for these Christians: electing for salvation, calling through the gospel, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. But any consideration of these things almost necessarily implies causing thanksgiving. Such is the natural response of the Christian to God's grace.

The variant reading between aparxen and ap arxes is a difference between reading "firstfruits" and "from the beginning." Concerning aparxen, the UBS text gives this choice a C rating, indicating there is considerable doubt that this is the correct reading. Rightly so. The witnesses for this reading are not so widespread as for ap arxes. Also to be weighed are problems in sense if "firstfruits" is used. In no way can the Thessalonians be considered firstfruits either in the New Testament church in general or in that particular geographic area. On the other hand, "from the beginning" has support in both Western and Alexandrian texts. The thought is also much more in keeping with a discussion of election (Eph. 1:4).

Eilato, aorist middle of airew, is not the usual eklegomai or prooridsw Paul uses elsewhere. Yet the sense is virtually the same. God chose the Thessalonians for Himself from the beginning of time. Notice that any discussion of election was absent in the section on the Man of Lawlessness and his followers. Clearly we see again Scripture's testimony that God elects no one for damnation, but rather damnation comes as a result of man's own unbelief and sin. But here, as a word of comfort and assurance to God's people, Paul reminds them of God's plan for them from long ago. Their election was eis swterian, unto salvation.

God's instruments to actually bring them unto salvation are the sanctifying work of the Spirit (hagiasmw pneumatos) and faith in the truth (pistei aletheias). Here sanctification is used in the wider sense, referring to all those phases of the Holy Spirit's work by which He leads sinners from the state of wrath unto the state of grace (conversion), and preserves them therein until they enter into the state of glory (preservation). Standing in stark contrast to condemnation through delighting in wickedness and error, is salvation through faith in the truth. Again in this passage, we hear the gospel proclamation that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ, the subject and establisher of the gospel.

And lest there be any doubt as to what means the Holy Ghost uses to sanctify, or what brings men unto faith in the truth, verse 14 continues. Eis ho refers to swterian of verse 13, God's call in time to those He chose

for Himself in eternity comes dia tou euaggeliou emwn, through our gospel. The genitive does not imply it is a gospel peculiar to Paul. In emwn there may be a mixture of simple possession (Paul received it from the Lord) and source (they heard it from Paul, Silas, and Timothy). In either case the emphasis is on gospel here. Satan's deadly lies are set loose in the world from the lips of Antichrist: the true, saving gospel sounds forth in the world from God's appointed heralds. The truth can only be found in the gospel: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:31-32). God has chosen and uses the Word of God, Holy Scripture, to communicate divine truth to us. Nowhere else but in the inspired and inerrant Word of God can the sinner come to know the truth in a world full of error and lies.

The purpose of God's gracious call through the gospel is set forth in eis peripoiesin doxes tou emwn Insou Xristou. The ultimate goal to which God has called the Thessalonians is the Kingdom of Glory, to actually share in the glory of Him who is co-heir and Savior, Jesus. Here is a parallel thought to Paul's words in Romans 3:17: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." Some have said the thought of "gaining for oneself" in peripoiesi, a verbal substantive, is unacceptable. Yet the idea of the sinner gaining God's blessings for himself is found elsewhere in Scripture. A thought close to the one found here in the middle force of peripoiesi is also found in Jesus' words to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount: "...store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." The emphasis should be placed on what the individual receives for his very own from the hand of God.

Paul had much to say to the Thessalonians by way of praise for their active, growing faith and love. He had the preceding words of greatest assurance for them. But Paul's concern for these brothers in Christ does not end. Encouragement by pointing out the good that exists must always be found with exhortation. Thus Paul continues with encouragement to hold to the Word of Truth.

III.

Translation of Verse 15:

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught whether by word or our letter.

Paul's durative imperatives, to keep standing fast and to keep holding, do not take away any of the preceding certainty. Rather the exhortation is built on it. Such standing fast and holding is not only a manifestation of a Christian's faith, it is a most important factor in retaining that faith. Tas paradosis refers to that which was handed down, here obviously the gospel of Jesus Christ—God's Word. The aorist passive of didaskw indicates how the Christians in Thessalonica actually came to be Christians and possessors of the truth—they were taught. A case in point of what Paul says in Romans 10:13-14: "...'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" The nouns without article in dia logou and di epistoles emwn set the two methods of handing the faith down side by side. It was accomplished first through Paul's preaching. And while Paul desired to return to add to their faith verbally, Satan hindered him (I Thess. 1:18). But God's Word was to have free course, and so it was through their letters that Paul, Silas, and Timothy added what was lacking in their faith. The truth was communicated then, as now, both through the spoken Word of God and the written. Once again we see how the early Christian church grew as the Holy Spirit worked through the means of grace. Paul's exhortation was to insure that the faith would remain in their possession, and that it spread as it and people were brought together.

IV.

Paul continues with prayer for God's continued blessings on the Thessalonians. A Translation of Verses 16-17;

May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and gave us everlasting encouragement and good hope in grace, encourage and strengthen your hearts in every good deed and word.

Paul has included in this section a warning, thanksgiving and words of assurance, and exhortation. How fitting that he now close with prayer! Autos is emphatic, speaking of the very same Lord Jesus Christ whose glory they will one day share. By placing both names (Iesou Xristos kai ho Theos ho pater) side by side, Paul puts them in a position of equality. This is also expressed in the singular relative pronoun and singular verb. Such a construction poses no problem in light of Jesus' own words in John 10:30: "I and the Father are one." At the same time, the double hemwn lays claim to both—a confession of faith. Paul is drawn to express the oneness in faith they enjoy also in the long relative clause. They are together loved by the Lord. The aorist does not imply that He once did but no longer, it is constative expressing the blessed reality of His ongoing love.

This description of God doesn't end with love. Two specific gifts are mentioned. Dous ought also be taken as constative. Everlasting encouragement and good hope do not refer to subjective feelings in the heart. Rather the adjectives indicate this is encouragement for all time because God gives it in His Word which never passes away. The hope is truly good, to be considered most precious, because it is the hope promised in the gospel—forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And how can Paul account for having received these gifts? *Sola gratia*. They come in God's grace—flow from God's undeserved and faithful love. No other explanation is advanced here or elsewhere in Scripture. Paul and the Thessalonians are thus blessed not because of any attractiveness or merit on their part, but wholly by God's grace.

The wish Paul has for them is found in parakalesai and stepixai (both optatives). Again both aorists are best taken as constative and express what God will continue to do in the future in answer to Paul's prayer. Tas kardias is used in its typical Greek sense as the seat of physical, mental, and spiritual life. Paul prays that their spiritual life be encouraged and strengthened in every good and worthy deed and word. Paul simply prays for more of what he has already seen at Thessalonica.

V.

Notes on the Importance of this Section in our Teaching and Preaching

Any discussion of the Antichrist is strong meat for any Christian, especially for those young in the faith. And yet when we see Paul lay it before his readers in the young Thessalonian church, we ought to be encouraged to do likewise. Certainly, if Paul, or rather our Lord through Paul, saw the spiritual benefit to His people even at a time when the Man of Lawlessness was not yet full blown, there is much benefit to be gained in our day. The Man of Lawlessness is at work. On the basis of God's Word we can and have identified him. In view of the opening verses of our text we see his danger, both in his lies and in the terrible judgement God describes for those who refuse to love the truth and rather cling to his lies.

If we can keep in the forefront just what is at stake in the whole matter, then as Lutheran pastors and professors we will be bold to treat the subject. His lie is still the same—a denial of justification *sola fide*. He supports his own work-righteousness and related errors not *sola Scriptura*, but on the strength of his own authority. The brand of grace in his theology is shot through with works. The very tenets of the Reformation are at stake. A quote by Spener is very much to the point:

...We should diligently note this truth and material, that the Roman Pope is the Antichrist, and not regret the time spent in having listened to this truth. For this is an article which our Church expressly professes in the Smalcald Articles; and we, too, certainly dare not relinquish this truth, and the closer we fear the time to be when the Roman Babylon may be permitted to vent its last fury and persecution upon us, the more need is there that we be fully grounded and confirmed in this knowledge in order that we may learn to guard against it (the Papacy), for this I regard as a

certainty: Whoever does not yet recognize the kingdom of the Pope as the kingdom of the Antichrist is not yet standing so firm that he may not by this or that seduction be converted to it.²

Surely we ought to warn just as Paul did, as well as assure our people God will turn his evil back on his own head.

But the bulk of our text treats a different subject, and serves a different purpose, Paul offers assurance—based on the truth of God's Word. He reminds us of our election, calling through the gospel, and sanctification—all by God's grace alone. And he speaks of the familiar justification by faith theme he treats in his other epistles. In short, Paul offers us a classic text for Reformation or Confirmation here. Here is a text filled to the brim with assurance for God's people, and fine Christian exhortations. May the Holy Spirit bless it as we carry it to our people as richly as He blessed the Thessalonians!

Endnotes

¹ Wilbert Gawrisch, *Eschatological Prophecies and Current Misinterpretations*, Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company.

² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.

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N.B. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.