

4-1-1942

Leading Thoughts on Eschatology in the Epistles to the Thessalonians

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Recommended Citation

Fuerbringer, L. (1942) "Leading Thoughts on Eschatology in the Epistles to the Thessalonians," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 13 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol13/iss1/21>

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Leading Thoughts on Eschatology in the Epistles to the Thessalonians

II

In his First Epistle St. Paul had directed the Thessalonians not to concern themselves about the exact time and hour of the return of Christ. Chap. 5:1, 2. But that was just the thing in which many within the congregation were particularly interested. Already from the First Epistle we see that the return of Christ had become so live a question within the congregation that many had become disturbed over it; some had gone so far as to neglect their daily work, idly depending on others to support them, and in their fanatical zeal many regarded spiritual matters as the only ones worthy of their time and thought. For that reason Paul had admonished them: "Study to be quiet and to do your own business and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without and that ye may have lack of nothing." Chap. 4:11, 12. He had shown them the proper attitude with regard to Christ's return. Yet Paul's efforts had not met with the success desired. In fact, as a result of ever increasing persecutions and the intrigues of false teachers, many Thessalonians had come to the conviction that the return of the Lord would take place immediately, and for that reason they began to neglect their daily occupation, walked disorderly, and became "busybodies," 2 Thess. 3:10-12. Therefore the apostle now supplements his previous eschatological instructions by pointing out that the Lord will indeed return for judgment but that He will not come before the great Antichrist will be revealed. That is the second leading eschatological thought in the Epistles to the Thessalonians.

The section coming into consideration here is 2 Thess. 2:1-12. Paul begins: "*Now, we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and by our gathering together unto Him 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.*" Vv. 1, 2. The return of the Lord, the personal, glorious return of Christ, which, as he had just shown, will take place for the punishment of the ungodly but will bring a reward of grace to the believers, chap. 1:3-10, this return is still uppermost in his mind, and he regards it as a matter of such vital importance to all Christians that he pleads with his readers to give careful heed to what he has to say. The return of Christ will bring with it, as the apostle here indicates, "our gathering together unto Him," "unsere Versammlung zu ihm." After those who have

fallen asleep in Christ will have been raised from the dead and after the living believers in Christ will have been changed, both will be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, to be with Him forever. 1 Thess. 4:17. In this important and consoling truth the Thessalonians are not to let themselves be shaken, be made to waver, be disturbed, so as to be deprived of their reasoning power, their ability calmly to deliberate on matters, ἀπὸ τοῦ νοός; much less are they to permit themselves to become frightened and terrified. These expressions, as also the adverb connected with them, "soon," ταχέως, quickly, indicate that as soon as the subject of the return of Christ was mentioned in the congregation, the Thessalonians were seized by a certain panic, or at least they were in danger of being thus carried away and becoming confused. Three factors might be the cause of such a disturbed state of mind: spirit, word, and letter.

In the first place the Thessalonians should not permit themselves to be misled by "spirit," διὰ πνεύματος. This expression most probably refers to the miraculous gift of prophecy in apostolic times rather than to fraudulent manifestations of spirits or revelations by dreams. Members of the assembled congregation would be seized by the Spirit of God and make prophetic utterances. There was present always the danger of abusing this gift, of uttering one's own views, while purporting to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Therefore these prophetic utterances were not to be accepted indiscriminately. They were to be tested by the revealed Word of God, by the doctrine of the apostles. This the apostle emphasizes on various occasions, particularly also in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, "Quench not the Spirit, despise not prophesyings, prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Chap. 5:19-21. Cp. 1 Cor. 14:32; Rom. 12:7. In like manner Paul here very clearly warns his readers against the danger of being deceived by men claiming to have the divine gift of prophecy. If any prophet told them that the *parusia* of Christ was present, they should not believe him, not permit him to disturb and terrify them. Such prophets were speaking not the Word of God but their own preconceived views; they were not teachers but disturbers of the congregation.

With like care the Thessalonians were to be on their guard against the danger of being misled by "word," or speech, διὰ λόγου. This term does not denote some word of Christ or of the apostles that was misunderstood by the Thessalonians. In contrast to "spirit" it means here a discourse or instruction by means of simple exposition of Scripture based on personal study of the written Word, connected perhaps with frequent quotations from Holy Writ. It denotes, therefore, a discourse spoken not in

prophetic ecstasy, during which the Holy Spirit controlled and moved the powers of thought and speech, but an instruction on the order of the sermons or catechetical instructions of our day. Cp. 1 Cor. 14:26 διδασχί; 12:8, λόγος.

Finally, the Thessalonians were not to let themselves be misled by a "letter" allegedly written and sent by Paul. This refers not, as some have claimed, to a misunderstanding of the First Epistle to the Thessalonians but rather to a letter falsely ascribed to the apostle, which seems to have contained the error mentioned, a letter of which no copy exists today. (Cp. Paul's criterion for determining the authenticity of his letters, namely, his personal signature. 2 Thess. 3:17; 2:15.) Even as it was possible in Thessalonica for false prophecy and false teaching to prevail, so it seems that a forged letter of Paul was being circulated. It may be, too, that Paul is merely pointing to the possibility that forged letters bearing his name might be circulated.

Through the three mediums just mentioned the members of the congregation might easily be led to believe that the Day of the Lord had actually dawned, and naturally their conduct would be governed accordingly. Luther has given us a correct translation of the Greek word ἐνέστηκεν, "*vorhanden sei.*" The Authorized Version is likewise correct when it translates "at hand," also the American Revised Version when it translates "just at hand." The meaning is not: The day of the Lord is near, or is about to dawn, but is actually here, is present. (Cp. Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 3:32; Gal. 1:4.) This view Paul rejects as incorrect when he says, "As that the day of Christ is at hand," ὡς before ἔτι. At the same time the prominent position of the verb ἐνέστηκεν, "as though at hand is the day of Christ," indicates that Paul does not wish to have the Day of Judgment to be thought of only as in the distant future. The thing against which he cautions is that the Thessalonians permit themselves to be disturbed by the cry: "Now He is here." Very likely the persecutions, which had broken out anew in violent form, had brought about that state of mind in Thessalonica. Such persecutions were looked up as the tribulations that were immediately to precede the return of Christ, and one said to another: "That must be the beginning of the Day of Judgment."

Perhaps a similar reminder would not be amiss in this connection. When reference is made to the so-called "signs of the times," it is common practice to use expressions such as: "The world cannot stand much longer; the Last Day must be near." Certainly those who speak thus mean well. Nonetheless, we should be cautious lest we become too definite and positive in our assertions. For no man knows when God's hour for certain events

will strike and when all the various signs of the times which God has arranged will have been fulfilled completely. On the other hand, we should not overlook the other truth of the text. In discussing the first point we observed that the return of Christ will be terrible for the unbelievers and the children of this world, for those living in carnal security and unfaithfulness. (Cp. March issue, p. 191.) To such people Judgment Day will come as a thief in the night. The destruction will overtake them suddenly, as the pains of a woman in travail, and they will not escape. However, here Paul speaks of the believers, the Christians. They are not to let themselves be frightened or disturbed; to them the thought of Judgment Day is not to be one of terror but rather a source of comfort. For the return of Christ will mean for them their gathering unto their Lord and Savior. While the hearts of unbelievers will fail them for fear and for looking after those things which are coming on earth; while they will cry out frantically when the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the heavens and they will see Him come in the clouds with great power and glory; while they will say to the mountains: "Fall on us," and to the hills: "Cover us and hide us from the face of Him who sitteth upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb," the believers are to lift up their heads with joy, for their redemption draweth nigh. Luke 21:26; Matt. 24:30; Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:16; Luke 21:28.

The apostle continues in verse 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.*" The apostle's sincere concern for the Thessalonians prompts him to repeat his admonition and at the same time to show the urgent need of such warning exhortation. The claim that the Day of the Lord has now come involves a very serious and dangerous error into which they are to permit no one to seduce, ἐξαπατήσῃ, them by any means, either in the manner indicated in v. 2 or in any other way. It is a manifest deception, an outright fraud, when anyone for any reason whatever says: "The Day of the Lord is here." Two things must first, ἀρῶτον, come to pass before the Last Day can dawn: there must have come the great falling away, and the man of sin must have been revealed. Paul is very definite in expressing himself; both times he uses the definite article: "*the falling away,*" "*the man of sin,*" "*the son of perdition,*" so that we are compelled to conclude: from Paul's oral teachings the readers knew what he meant by "falling away" and "man of sin." Accordingly he says in v. 5: "Remember ye not, that when I was yet with you, I told you these things?" When he speaks here of the falling away, the apostasy which must first occur before the Last Day comes, he does not mean any kind of

political rebellion, as, for example, the revolt of the Jews against the Romans or some other upheaval in the Roman Empire, as claimed by Tertullian and Jerome, but a religious revolt, a falling away from God and from faith in Him. That is clear from the expression he uses, which always has this sense in Scripture (Acts 21:21; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12). Moreover, the context compels us to accept that meaning, for immediately upon the word "falling away" follows the expression "the man of sin," and in v. 7 the falling away is described as iniquity, literally "lawlessness." The word "falling away," ἀποστασία, Abfall, however, dare not be regarded as an abstract designation of a person, as though the Antichrist himself were meant; no, the word must be permitted to retain its specific sense, a falling away from faith. This falling away will then lead to a suspension of all divine order, will result in iniquity, lawlessness, v. 7. Although the Christian Church was still in the prime of spiritual vigor and strength, although Paul in the first chapter of this very letter had praised the steadfastness and loyalty of the Thessalonians, vv. 3-5, yet the future of the Church looms up dark and dreary before his vision.

Combined with the great falling away will be the appearance of the man of sin. That is clear from the close connection between the two sentences. The falling away from faith will prepare the way for the man of sin. His appearance would be impossible if all were well with the Church.

This man of sin is none other than the Roman Antichrist, the Pope at Rome. Before, however, introducing evidence to that effect, let us first examine closely the meaning of the expressions which the apostle uses. At the end of the entire section we shall see the more clearly who is meant. However, even now it will not be amiss to use the expression Antichrist, since practically all ancient and modern commentators agree that the Antichrist is meant when reference is made to the man of sin, even though they differ widely in their views as to who that Antichrist is. First the apostle uses the expression "The man of sin shall be revealed," ἀποκαλυφθή. He places the Antichrist on a parallel with Christ. His appearance is a terrible counterpart to the return of Christ, to which he had referred before, 2 Thess. 1:7. At the time that man of sin was still concealed, but in due time he would be revealed. In verse 9 even the technical term used in the Epistles to the Thessalonians when speaking of the return of Christ, παρουσία, is used also in connection with the Antichrist. Just as there will be a parusia of Christ, so there will be one also of the Antichrist. And just because the Antichrist presents a parallel (of course, a parallel of contrast) to Christ, just because he is in every respect the opposite of Christ, the name Antichrist, ἀντίχριστος,

is employed to designate this particular personage. However, we dare not forget that Paul himself never uses that expression; the term originated in St. John's Epistles, where it is used also in a wider sense and in the plural number, 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7. In the passage under consideration the Antichrist is called the man of sin, not merely a sinner, *ἄνομος* or *ἁμαρτωλός*, but much stronger: "The man of sin," the man of lawlessness, that man of sin, *ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας*. In his lawlessness sin is, so to speak, concentrated and personified. Being the man of sin, he is the reverse of Christ, who so frequently is called the Holy One and Just One, Acts 3:14; 7:52, and who is made unto us righteousness, 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; he is a real Antichrist. Again, he is called: "The son of perdition," *ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας*. Because he is the representative of sin, he is doomed to perdition. That is the meaning of the term, which originates from the Hebrew and denotes closest and most intimate connection: "The son of perdition"; the meaning is not that he leads to perdition, which, of course, is true, but that he will be plunged into perdition, that he is inseparably connected with perdition, hopelessly in its grasp. The expression is used by the Lord on one occasion with reference to the betrayer, Judas Iscariot, where Luther translates properly "das verlorne Kind," the son of perdition, John 17:12. In the Book of Revelation the same word "perdition" is used of the beast that is to come, the Antichrist and his kingdom. There we read: "And the beast that was and is not, even he is the eighth and is of the seventh and goeth into perdition," *εἰς ἀπώλειαν ἰπάγει*, Rev. 17:11. This is an apt translation, for perdition here as in other passages also means everlasting perdition, damnation, Phil. 3:19; Matt. 7:13. Some commentators, for example, the errorist Pelagius, have maintained that this portrayal can apply only to Satan himself. That such is not the case is clear from verse 9, where Satan is clearly distinguished from the individual here described: the Antichrist's "coming is after the works of Satan." As we shall see later, we will have no difficulty in finding a manifestation that fits the expression here used.

However, before proceeding, we should note the evident allusions in this verse to the ancient prophecies of Daniel, whose words in general have such an important bearing on the doctrine of the Antichrist. Daniel 8:23 we read the well-known prophecy regarding the world empires: "In the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors are come to the full," literally: when the rebellious will carry out their apostasy to the limit, "the king of fierce countenance and understanding dark sentences shall stand up." The king referred to is Antiochus Epiphanes, the Illustrious, a well-known type of the Antichrist, and the word translated "trans-

gressor," derived from the verb *ὑψῆσαι*, which means to become rebellious, to fall away, expresses the same idea as the Greek word *ἀποστασία*, apostasy, used by the Apostle. In the First Book of the Maccabees the same expressions are again used in describing the times of godless Antiochus. 1 Macc. 1:15, *ἀπέστησαν*; 2:15, *ἀποστασία*. Thus Christendom will witness a time similar to that inflicted upon Judah and Jerusalem by wicked Antiochus. In the Book of Daniel we find also the above-mentioned parallel between Christ and the Antichrist. In chap. 9:24-27, while the interpretation of the passage is a subject of much controversy, we read in v. 25 concerning the seventy weeks: "Unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks." That is a prophecy of Christ. In v. 26 we then read: 'After threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off . . . and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.' We are firmly convinced that we have here a reference to the Antichrist. A prince, the Antichrist, will rise in opposition to the Prince, Christ.

The Apostle continues in his detailed description of the Antichrist: "*Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God,*" v. 4. These words describe the activity and the *modus operandi* of the Antichrist. He opposes and exalts himself above everything that is called God or that is worshiped. He is an adversary, *ἀντικείμενος*, who opposeth, who sets himself against. He opposes not only Christ the Son of God, but everything that is God or worshiped as God. He is not only an *Antichrist*, *ἀντίχριστος*, but, as Chrysostomus aptly remarks, an *Antigod*, *ἀντίθεος*, in the fullest sense of the word. In this respect he corresponds to Satan, for Satan is called the adversary, *ἄδης*, whose work is "to resist," *ἰσχυρῶς*, LXX: τοῦ ἀντικείσθαι αὐτῷ Zech. 3:1. (Cp. 1 Pet. 5:8, ὁ ἀντίδικος ὑμῶν διάβολος, an opponent in court.) What Satan is in the spirit world the Antichrist is among men. True, he is not an incarnation of Satan, as some commentators would have it, but he is a tool of Satan, as emphasized in v. 9: "Whose coming is after the working of Satan." Moreover, the Antichrist is one who "exalteth himself above all that is called God," *ὑπερηφάνητος*; arrogantly he poses as being above the true God and everyone who is called God. The expression: "Above all that is called God," *ἐπὶ πάντα λεγόμενον θεόν*, includes the true God as well as false gods, which are merely called god without actually being God. 1 Cor. 8:5, 6. Again the description reminds us of two prophecies of Daniel concerning the Antichrist: "He shall speak great words against the most High," 7:25; "The king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god and shall speak marvelous things against the God

of gods," 11:36. The Book of Revelation uses similar language in describing the seven-headed beast: "He openeth his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle," 13:6. (Cp. Paul's expression: "sitteth in the temple of God.") Not only will the Antichrist exalt himself above God but also over everything that is worshiped, everything which is an object of reverence, *σέβασμα*. In the final analysis, he will revere nothing, will humble himself before no one but will exalt himself above everything worthy of reverence. He will demand reverence and worship exclusively for himself, will idolize himself. Therefore Paul at once adds: "So that he as God sitteth in the temple of God." ("As a god," is omitted by the best critical texts and is not needed.) The infamy, the pride, the opposition of the Antichrist knows no limits. He himself (*αὐτόν* is emphasized), the arrogant one, who has lost all respect for things divine, he personally seats himself as on a throne and as God Himself in the temple of God, in the sanctuary of God, for the word used here, *ναός*, indicates the actual temple in contrast to the word *ιερόν*, sanctuary; the latter means a group of sacred buildings with the temple in the center. He takes his seat there naturally for the purpose of being honored and worshiped. That is clear from the entire connection (compare particularly the words immediately following), even though the words "as God" do not seem to be a part of the original text.

But what is the temple of God? Certainly not a heathen temple, as some have assumed; the definite article, "the temple," *εἰς τὸν ναόν*, and the addition, "in the temple of God," the true God, *τοῦ θεοῦ*, argue against that interpretation. Nor can the Temple at Jerusalem be meant, which indeed was generally referred to as the temple of the true God. Most likely this Temple was still in existence when Paul's letter was written, but it had lost its significance altogether; in fact, soon thereafter it was destroyed, and the Antichrist portrayed in the Epistle before us never sat in that Temple. The spiritual temple is meant, the one of which the Temple at Jerusalem was a type, the true house of God, the Christian Church, 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; Rev. 3:12. The expressions used here again hark back to Daniel, who prophesied concerning Antiochus Epiphanes, the type of the Antichrist, that he would profane the sanctuary and would "place the abomination that maketh desolate." Dan. 11:31. Concerning the Antichrist himself Daniel says that in his day the Messiah will be cut off, that he will destroy the city and the sanctuary and that he will cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease. Chap. 9:26, 27. Likewise the passage under consideration reminds us of the eschatological discourse of Christ in which He speaks of the "abomination of desolation" (and this

refers to the rage of the Antichrist), saying that it would stand in the Holy Place. Matt. 24:15.

Finally Paul adds that Antichrist "will show himself that he is God," setting forth, demonstrating that he is God, "gibt sich vor, er sei Gott." Not only does he seat himself in the temple of God, usurping that place as though he had a claim to it, but he actually claims divine dignity for himself and on that account demands the reverence that is due to God alone. That to which Christ alone has a claim this infamous person claims for himself. He is not content to call himself God by mere words: by means of signs and wonders, which many will believe, he seeks to prove himself to be God. It is indeed a horrible, repulsive picture which the Apostle paints, and we will have to note carefully and keep in mind all its details in order to recognize the person placed before our view.

L. FUERBRINGER

Luther: A Blessing to the English

IV. A Battle Royal

When the corrupt clergy would do nothing to better the corrupt Church, Luther appealed "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation on the Betterment of the Christian Estate," and many hailed him as the desired champion of the nation and shouted Hosannah! Hallelujah! When, however, in the same 1520 he wrote "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," he published an earthquake and committed the unpardonable sin against the priests, and many cried "Crucify! This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" We are reminded of the account John 6:60, 66: "From that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him."

Strange to say, the higher critics thought Luther was not capable of writing this earthquake, and they thought Erasmus was capable of writing it! Imagine this timid man's surprise when he was reported at Louvain as the author of this radical heresy! In June, 1521, he wrote his old patron, William Lord Mountjoy, denying writing any of Luther's works but justifying him in exposing the evils of the times known to all. And on July 5 he wrote Dean Pace there is not a syllable of his in all Luther's books, but he cannot admire enough the spirit in which he writes. And on March 7, 1522, he writes Cardinal Wolsey he had nothing to do with Luther's "Assertion" and "Babylonian Captivity."

On January 21, 1521, Ambassador Tunstal at the world-historic Reichstag of Worms sent Wolsey a copy of the world-revolutionary