

MUST SAVING FAITH INCLUDE LOVE?

A Paper

Presented to



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by
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I recently purchased John Piper's new book *What Is Saving Faith?* I bought it because I want to read it and write a book review on it from a Free Grace perspective. I took the book out of the packaging and began to flip through some of the pages. A few of Piper's statements really puzzled me because I know they're contrary to what the Bible actually teaches. For example, commenting on 2 Thessalonians 2:10, Piper says: "*In 2:10, people perish because they do not 'love the truth.'*"[1] After a few comments, Piper goes on to elaborate by saying: "*Paul is saying that people perish not only because they do not love the truth, but also because they do not want to love the truth.*"[2] Piper then asks this question: "*would it not be right to say that saving faith includes a love for the truth, the gospel?*"[3] Piper goes on to answer this question by saying: "*So Paul again [in v. 12], as in verse 10, calls attention to the affectional nature of saving faith. It includes a love of the truth, the gospel.*"[4] But is this what the apostle Paul is saying? Let's take a closer look.

Notice first what Dean Henry Alford (a leading New Testament Greek scholar from the 19th century) has written on 2 Thessalonians 2:10. Alford writes:

"those who are perishing (on their way to perdition), (WHY? not by God's absolute decree, but) **because** (in requital for this, that) **they did not** (when it was offered to them) **receive the love of the truth** (the opposite of the *ψεῦδος* ["lie"] which characterizes all the working of the man of sin: see as before, Joh 8:44) **in order to their being saved.**"[5]

I mention these comments by Henry Alford because Reformed theologians (such as John Piper, for example) commonly teach that people must love God in order to be saved.[6] But that's not what the Bible teaches. The gospel is not about *us* loving God, but rather it's about *God* loving us! Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates *His own love towards us*, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." The truth of the Gospel is that "*God so loved the world* that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but has everlasting life" (John 3:16). This is what the apostle Paul is talking about in 2 Thessalonians 2:10 when he says that "they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (NASB). In other words, people are perishing because "they did not receive" (v. 10) the gospel message of God's love.

The New International Version (the NIV) and the English Standard Version (the ESV) really "drop the ball" (mishandle the text) in their translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:10. For example, the NIV says, "They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." Notice that in the NIV, the word "love" is an infinitive verb. It says: "they refused to love" (v. 10b, NIV). But in the Greek, the word "love" is actually a noun! In Greek it is *tēn agapēn*, meaning "the love" (as in the KJV, NKJV, NASB, HCSB, the 1901 ASV, the 1885 Revised Version, Young's literal translation, Tyndale's translation, etc.). The word "love" is a noun in the accusative case in the Greek, signifying that *love* is the direct object, not a verb. Thus, Paul is not describing something the unsaved must do, but rather he's describing something they must *receive*, i.e. the gospel message of God's love. I like how the NET Bible translates 2 Thessalonians 2:10. It says that people "are perishing, because they found no place in their hearts for the truth so as to be saved." 2

Thessalonians 2:10 in Mounce's Reverse Interlinear translation reads similarly. It says that people "are perishing, because they did not accept the love of the truth so as to be saved." In other words, "[they] are perishing, because they did not accept" the gospel message.[7] But of course Piper loves to quote the ESV (a favorite among Reformed theologians) and he takes that ball and runs with it! Unfortunately, Piper doesn't realize that the ESV "dropped the ball" in their translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:10, and therefore whatever points he may score from his use of the ESV will be of none effect because it's not what the Greek text actually says.

Appendix 1:
WHAT ABOUT THE "OBJECTIVE GENITIVE" IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:10?

If we understand "the love of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:10) as an objective genitive, then the phrase could be translated "the love *in* the truth".[8] In other words, in 2 Thessalonians 2:10 the apostle Paul is saying that unbelievers will perish because they did not accept the love of God demonstrated "in" the gospel! A similar example of the objective genitive is found in Luke 11:29: "the sign of Jonah" means "the sign shown in Jonah". Concerning this, A. T. Robertson affirms: "So το σημειον Ἰωννα (Lu. 11:29) may be the sign shown in Jonah".[9] Thus in 2 Thessalonians 2:10, "the love of the truth" may be understood to mean "the love shown in the truth"—i.e., the love shown in the gospel! What is the love shown in the gospel? Is it our love for God or rather His love for us? The apostle Paul says: "But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Likewise, the apostle John (the apostle of love) writes: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:9-10).

Appendix 2:
WHAT ABOUT LOVING GOD IN JOHN 3:19?

Somebody might respond by saying, "Doesn't Jesus say in John chapter 3, 'And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil.' Doesn't this show that a person has to love God in order to be saved?"

No, not at all. Notice that Jesus *doesn't* say, "And this is the way to heaven." But what does He say? Look at the text. He says, "And this is THE JUDGMENT, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil" (Jn. 3:19). This is simply a description of those who reject Christ. In the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isaiah 5:20).

Read John chapter 3. Nowhere in the whole chapter does Jesus say that salvation is obtained by loving Him (although this should follow after a person is saved, but it does not always do so in

proper measure), but rather Jesus emphasizes that salvation is GIVEN to the one who *believes* in Him (see John 3:12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 36). Eternal life is given to those who "believe"!

William R. Newell has rightly said: "To preach devotion first [i.e. love God to be saved], and blessing second, is to reverse God's order, and preach *law* [see Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:36-40], *not grace*. The Law made man's blessing depend on devotion; Grace *confers undeserved, unconditional* blessing: our devotion may follow, but does not always do so,—in proper measure." [10] Newell goes on to say, "Only those can and do really love God whose hearts have been 'sprinkled from an evil conscience'—delivered from fear of God's just judgment. The question therefore, comes right back to this: Have we believed, as guilty lost sinners, on this propitiation by the blood of God's Son on the cross? Is that our only hope? If so, 1 John 4.16 becomes true: 'We know and have believed the love which God hath in our case,' and verse 19 follows: 'We love, because he first loved us.' We cannot work up love for God, but His redeeming love for us, believed in, becomes the eternal cause and spring of our love to God." [11]

This does not mean that there will be no emotions in the salvation experience. Roy Aldrich, a Free Grace advocate and the author of *Holding Fast to Grace*, is correct to say: "it should not be concluded that the experience of salvation will be devoid of emotion. Psychologists say that every important decision of the mind is accompanied by emotion. Surely there will be emotion with the great change of mind that takes place when a sinner first believes in Christ. However, this emotional experience will vary with circumstances and temperament and it should not be demanded either as a condition or proof of salvation." [12]

FOOTNOTES

[1] John Piper, *What Is Saving Faith?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), p. 180.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 181, emphasis his.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 181, emphasis his.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 182, emphasis his.

[5] Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Cambridge: 1897), 4 vols., vol. 3, p. 292, emphasis his, brackets added.

[6] For example, see the article by John Piper on the *Desiring God* website titled "Love Is the Main Thing in Saving Faith". Piper begins the article by saying, "*Love is the main thing in saving faith*. Those are the words of Jonathan Edwards, and if they are true, life and ministry are changed forever. By *love*, he means love to God. And by *main thing*, he means 'the life and power of [saving faith], by which it produces its great effects' (*Writings on the Trinity*, 448)." (Piper, "Love Is the Main Thing in Saving Faith" [February 29, 2016], *Desiring God* website, italics and brackets his. www.desiringgod.org/articles/love-is-the-main-thing-in-saving-faith)

[7] Commenting on 2 Thessalonians 2:10, A. T. Robertson (another noteworthy NT Greek scholar from the 19th century) affirms this when he writes: "*The love of the truth (tēn agapēn tēs alētheias)*. That is the gospel in contrast with *lying* and *deceit*." (See Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, commentary on 2 Thessalonians 2:10.)

[8] See A. T. Robertson's discussion of the objective genitive in his book: *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research*, pp. 499-500.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 500.

[10] William R. Newell, *Romans Verse-By-Verse* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1938), p. 247.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 328.

[12] Roy Aldrich, "Some Simple Difficulties of Salvation" (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, April 1954), p. 160.