

Thessalonians, Part 16: "Chosen by God"

2 Thessalonians 2:13 ESV (Pg. 575) But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. **14** To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. **15** So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. **16** Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, **17** comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. **3:1** Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, **2** and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. **3** But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. **4** And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. **5** May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

- I. This passage begins with the word "but". That word serves to contrast what is currently being said to what was stated before. Sometimes, when I lean in for a kiss, my wife says, "Honey, I love you", making me feel so good! Then she will say "...**but** you could really use a tic tac." Her devotion to me is total, and yet, my breath stinks, and I need to fix it before we proceed. Both facts are true; one in contrast to the other. My wife loves me, but something is hindering her enjoyment!
 - A. This passage contrasts what Paul has said in the bulk of 2nd Thessalonians about the coming judgement, rebellion, rise of the man of lawlessness, and even how the "mystery of lawlessness" is already at work at the present time with every encouraging thing Paul says in today's passage.
 1. Paul said in chapter 1 that in a final act of holy justice, God will "repay" the wicked "with affliction", inflicting holy "vengeance" on them. They will "suffer the punishment of eternal destruction"¹.
 2. In contrast here he says "**But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you...**" Judgement that awaits those who mock God's holiness, but the Thessalonians have been chosen by God because of his love for them. This fact obligates Paul to be thankful for the 2nd time². Remember chapter one?
 - a) **2 Thessalonians 1:3 ESV** We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.
 - b) Paul says "**God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved**". Some translations say "from the beginning"³. Depending on how you translate the Greek word, this means either the Thessalonians were first in their city to believe, or were the first generation of believers in church history.
 - B. But no matter which Paul meant, God's choice of the Thessalonians guarantees they will endure **present** trials, and their hope that they will escape God's wrath.
 1. God's choice was a theme celebrated by Paul. **1 Thessalonians 5:9 ESV** For God has not **destined**⁴ us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. They are sustained by God's election.

- a) We often trip over God's predestination in our western, "freedom-of-choice" mindset, but over and over the Old and New Testaments show God taking the initiative and choosing those he would claim as his own⁵.
 - b) **John 15:16 ESV** You did not choose me, **but I chose you and appointed you** that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.
- C. Paul continues laying out a pattern for our salvation, saying the Thessalonians were saved "through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth".
- 1. First, we were chosen by God, not because of anything good we had ever done or ever would do. Ephesians 1 says this happened even before creation⁶. Before you were conceived, or the stars were hung in the sky, God selected you for his own! We stand in awe of a God who loves us like that!
 - 2. Next, the Spirit raised us (as powerless, dead sinners) to life through the mysterious process of regeneration⁷. Again, this wasn't through your choosing or working; but God's calling and three-fold work of sanctification⁸:
 - a) First, we are sanctified (or made holy) **positionally**. We are considered righteous immediately when we respond to the gospel and are saved⁹.
 - b) From there, we are sanctified **progressively** as we yield to the Spirit's leading through obedience, daily becoming more Christlike¹⁰.
 - c) At the resurrection, we will be sanctified **perfectly**¹¹. We call this glorification, the inheritance of all who trust in Christ. Paul refers to it when he says: "To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Glorification is always the end goal of the gospel, not just morality, or an escape from judgement in hell.
- D. Choosing and sanctifying is God's work. But Paul said the Thessalonians have also been saved by their "belief in the truth". This is our part of the work; to believe and thereby be saved. But of those who will be punished with the man of lawlessness, Paul says they "refused to love the truth and so be saved¹²"?
- II. And yet belief is not something that we do once, and then go on about our lives. "So then, brothers, **stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.**" There are two prescriptions here for successful Christian living: **stand firm** and **hold on to the Word of God**.
- A. When Paul encourages them to "stand firm", again we see a contrast. Earlier he had told them "not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us"¹³.
- 1. "Stand Firm" is the Greek "steko" and it means to persist, persevere, or to keep one's standing¹⁴. But the Thessalonians were troubled by reports Christ returned and judgement had begun. Their foundations were shaking!
 - 2. Some of us hear the Word of the eternal God preached every week, and yet we are shaken to our core by everything the politicians say, or our boss does, or what our bank account lacks. But God's people should be steady!
 - a) **Philippians 1:27 ESV** Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, **I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind** striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, **28** and **not**

frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

- b) Our steadfastness is the outworking of a life worthy of the gospel, and a clear sign of our salvation to those who are without Christ in the world.
- B. But many have discovered that we are woefully incapable of standing firm in our own resolve, wisdom, strength or morality, so Paul says to stand firm by holding on to the traditions we have been taught through the Word of God.
 - 1. Our basis for victory can only be in what God has declared in his Word. Jesus proved that. Over and over his life was validated by the fact that he was fulfilling Old Testament prophecies¹⁵, meaning he overcame sin and death by the Word. When Jesus stood firm against the temptations of Satan¹⁶, 3 times he began his counterattack with these words: “It is written”.
 - 2. It’s heartbreaking when believers neglect the Bible and wonder why they seem to lose faith, or can’t seem to make sense of life in this sinful world. But this is an absolute impossibility! Belief cannot be maintained apart from clinging to God’s revelation of himself and his will in the scriptures.
 - a) The Word is the key to transformation. **Psalm 119:9 ESV** How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.
 - b) The Word is the key to defeating evil. **Ephesians 6:17 ESV** take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.
 - c) Most importantly, in places like John 5 and Luke 24¹⁷. Jesus states that without knowing the testimony of the written word, you can never truly know him. Religion and external morality can do a lot of things, but only the written Word of God can introduce you to the Eternal Holy One.
- III. As he has done a few times in these letters¹⁸, Paul again prays for the Thessalonian church: “**Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word**”. Just like he did at the end of the first letter, he puts the burden of the work on the shoulders of Jesus “himself”.
 - A. We don’t pray to saints, or dead relatives. We don’t perform various ceremonies in order to achieve some higher spiritual plane; we look to Jesus himself.
 - 1. **Proverbs 18:10 ESV** The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe. We’re safe because of what Jesus has done.
 - a) He has loved us! While we were still sinners, he chose us, and gave us life and righteousness. He provides for us, protects us, and sustains us.
 - b) He has given us eternal comfort and good hope. Though we are often unfaithful, his mercy endures forever and ever. Nothing can separate us from the love of God; not even time, death or our ongoing war with sin.
 - 2. And all of this has been accomplished by grace. **Ephesians 2:8 ESV** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **9** not a result of works, so that no one may boast. No bragging is appropriate among the people of God, because nothing we have has been earned, it has all been freely given in grace in spite of ourselves.
 - B. And this outpouring of grace doesn’t end when you first believe, but it is still being poured out for two wonderful purposes according to Paul...

1. "...to comfort your hearts" Living in this world is hard, and it is especially hostile toward those who standing firm in Jesus. But believers are armed with all the promises of God to help us endure.
 - a) **1 Peter 1:3 ESV** His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, **4** by which **he has granted to us his precious and very great promises**, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.
 - b) God cannot lie¹⁹, so in our believing we are comforted, knowing that he is working everything together for the good of those who love him, and are called according to his purpose²⁰, whether in suffering or success.
 2. God is also pouring out grace to "establish (our hearts) in every good work and word". Paul told the Ephesians he was made a minister of the Gospel by the "working of (God's) power"²¹. Everything we do that is effective is done empowered by the Spirit, although we're often ready to take the credit!
 - a) But when he speaks of establishing our hearts in good works and words, he's not just talking about the power to be something, but the power to be rooted and grounded by and in good works and words.
 - b) Have you ever had the experience of recalling something you read in the Bible or heard in a sermon right when you needed it? Perhaps you found the will or energy to do something you knew was right, or to resist doing something that you were certain was wrong. That's what he means here.
- IV. "Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith." What an honor it must have been for the Thessalonians to know not only that Paul was praying for them, but that he relied on their prayers as well. This demonstrated that we're all in this together!
- A. Paul basically asks for their prayers in three specific areas of his ministry:
 1. First, that the Word of God would "speed ahead". The Greek word is a metaphor for a speedy runner winning a race²². He is asking them to pray that the Gospel would win, against worldly philosophies, against the devil, and against hostile governments. He wants the truth to outrun lies and to go swiftly to the hearts of those who are lost. Instead of just showing up to church, we should all pray for the Word to go fast and win every contest!
 2. Next, he prays that the word would be "honored". It doesn't matter how fast the Word travels, if there isn't a heart ready to receive it. He points to their church as an example of how he hopes this will work. We know from Christ's "parable of the soils"²³ that the word can fall on all kinds of hearts, but Paul wants them to pray that the Spirit would prepare hearts to receive the truth.
 3. Last, he prays for protection from persecution, as well as any hinderance from ungodly human agents. He acknowledges that people aren't begging to hear the Word. Because of sin, many will be hostile. Nothing has changed.
 - B. "But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command."

1. They are still being persecuted. Some are hostile don't have faith. Times are tough! But God is still faithful! He will never leave or forsake the ones he chose²⁴. He will protect them from every fiery dart the devil hurls their way²⁵.
 2. Paul is so confident in God's unfailing love for them, that he has great confidence in the fruit of their obedient lives. Obedience is the fruit of true salvation. It is often imperfect, but it is always what real believers produce in progressively greater degree, proving that the Spirit is sanctifying us.
- C. Paul prays once more for the Thessalonians: **"May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ"**.
1. He wants them to always remember the love of God. When we think first of the rules of God, we will quickly forget his love. But when we think of how much he loves us, we will want to please him by keeping his commands²⁶.
 2. He wants them to know the "endurance of Christ". Knowing what Christ endured enables us to persevere. **Hebrews 12:1 ESV** *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **2 looking to Jesus**, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who **for the joy** that was set before him **endured the cross**, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Benediction: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24-26)

¹ 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9

² Also compare 1 Thessalonians 1:2 & 2:13

³ King James, New King James, New American Standard & Christian Standard versions of the Bible, for example.

⁴ “appoint” in CSB, NIV, NKJV; “hath not appointed” in KJV; “chose to save us” in NLT

⁵ Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:12; Psalm 135:4; Isaiah 43:1, 10; Jeremiah 1:4-5; Matthew 22:14; John 6:36, 44; Acts 13:48; Romans 8:29-30, 11:5; 1 Corinthians 1:27; Galatians 1:15-16; Ephesians 1:3-4; Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 13:8, 17:14; et al.

⁶ Ephesians 1:4-5

⁷ Ephesians 2:1-6

⁸ *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*; by Mark Howell; Pg. 239 © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:18

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:50-55

¹² 2 Thessalonians 2:10

¹³ 2 Thessalonians 2:2a

¹⁴ Strong's G4739 “steko”; see <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G4739&t=KJV>

¹⁵ Matthew 1:23; 2:6, 15,17; 3:3; 4:14; 11:10; 12:17-21, 38-42; 13:14-15, 35; 15:7; 21:4-5, 13, 16, 42; 22:43-46; 24:15; 26:56; 27:9-10; et al.

¹⁶ Matthew 4:1-11

¹⁷ See John 5:39 and Luke 24:27

¹⁸ 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, 5:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 3:16

¹⁹ Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18

²⁰ Romans 8:28

²¹ Ephesians 3:7

²² Strong's G5143 “trecho” see <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G5143&t=KJV>

²³ Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15

²⁴ Matthew 28:20

²⁵ Ephesians 6:16

26 John 14:15