

Message #4

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2 Thessalonians

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THE HEALTHY CHURCH

IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLED TIMES

2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-17

I.

Joann served in our church office for something like seventeen years. Early Thursday morning Don and Marge and I sent her and her sister off to the airport with a prayer and a hug. We would have liked to have a bigger and more appropriate farewell. As little as a couple of weeks ago we had talked about having a Sunday service at the end of August where we would play and sing some of her favorite songs and bid her farewell. But her cancer doctor told her that it was time to move back to her family in Illinois. She just did not bounce back from her recent radiation treatments like she had from previous treatments for her cancer. So we will have to make do with the card and money tree that we have in the back.

As I was working on the outline of my message on Wednesday, I heard a truck stop across the street from the church. I looked out and saw a La-Z-Boy truck making a delivery. Emblazoned on the side of the truck was the company motto: "Live Life Comfortably." That is a cute saying and probably appropriate for a furniture company. It is a motto that might be a temptation for all of us to adopt in our approach to life. It was not a motto that Joann and her husband Robert chose to adopt.

About seventeen years ago Joann left her job as a hotel manager to work here. I suspect that she took a substantial pay cut in doing that. About thirteen years ago Robert and Joann decided to take on the additional task of pastoring a small Baptist church in Rachel, Nevada. There was an empty church building there, and no one had led services in the place in some time. So each Sunday they made the 350 mile round trip to provide the only Christian services in a radius of about fifty miles. I doubt that the income that they received from the church covered their travel expenses. They did it to serve the Lord and to bless the people of that community.

About eight or ten years ago Joann was diagnosed with a serious form of cancer. Average life expectancy for that type of cancer was eighteen months. But the Lord was gracious and an experimental treatment extended her life. They kept doing their work and ministry. About six or seven years ago Robert was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. They kept going up to Rachel to serve in the church there. Finally they had to stop. Robert passed away about a year and a half ago. Joann kept working here until just recently. They did not choose to live life comfortably.

Most of us, I suspect, have also not chosen to live life comfortably. As a somewhat older congregation some of the challenges of life that we face are related to age and health. But as Christians we also seek to follow the example of Jesus who told His followers to take up their cross and follow Him. In doing that we are exposed to a spiritual world where there are unseen forces who seek to do us in and turn us away from our Christian commitment.

The Christians in Thessalonica in Greece in the first century were faced with the challenges of life that came from living in that place and time. But these recent converts from the preaching of the Apostle Paul were also facing persecution because of their new faith. From Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians we have seen that although this was a new church, it was a healthy church. For the Christians there displayed faith, love and hope. Second Thessalonians, which we are now studying, gives us the impression that if anything, the persecution has grown worse since the writing of that first letter. On top of that, the Christians there were misled by sources unknown to us that the day of the Lord had come. They understood Paul to have taught that the day of the Lord would be a time of judgment from God. Furthermore they had understood Paul to teach that the rapture of the church would take them away from this time of judgment and bring them to heaven.

We have seen in #2 that Paul reassured the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord had not come. There had to be a rapture first, and there had to be a tribulation that would involve a terrible time in which the Antichrist would control much of the earth. So the hope that the Thessalonian Christians had for an imminent return of Christ was still valid.

Now in our passage today Paul returns to the immediate concern about persecution. He wants them, and he wants us, to have a proper focus for living in the midst of troubled times.

II.

Thus in vv. 13 & 14 of #2 in 2 Thessalonians (p. 989) we find that IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLED TIMES CHRISTIANS NEED TO REMEMBER THEIR POSITION IN CHRIST. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLED TIMES...) Last week in the previous section we saw that the future course of evil involves a seven year tribulation in which the Antichrist and his forces exert considerable power. But the promise was that Christ would return and mete out judgment. So justice would prevail. There is reason to hope also because Christians can expect that the rapture of the church will happen first. With that as background Christians need to remember their position in Christ.

In v. 13 Paul writes, "**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.**" These brothers and sisters in Christ were facing troubled times. They were being persecuted

for their faith, though the exact nature of that persecution is not described. Then, according to v. 2, they had been shaken by the mistaken belief that they had entered the time of judgment known as the day of the Lord. These Christians needed to be reminded about the true security that they had. We Christians who face troubled times need to be reminded about our greatest source of security.

In v. 13 we are first reminded that Christian brothers and sisters are loved by the Lord, which is a term that Paul normally uses of Jesus Christ in particular. Back in v. 8 Paul said that Jesus Christ will return as Judge and will destroy the Antichrist. The assurance here is that we don't have to worry about that kind of judgment because we are loved by Jesus Christ.

Paul in v. 13 also speaks of God, which is usually with Paul a specific reference to God the Father. We have additional security not only because Christ loves us but also because God the Father chose us. The ESV translation that we are using here has "chose you as the first fruits." Some of you have translations that read "chose you from the beginning." There is uncertainty here about the original text. The early Greek manuscripts have a difference involving one letter. I am inclined to think that "chosen from the beginning" is the original reading.

Even if that is not the original text there are other verses in the New Testament that indicate that God the Father chose us from before we were born and before the world even existed. Look, for example, at Ephesians #1. (EPHESIANS 1:3-4A) In v. 3 and the first part of v. 4 we read, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world..."**

It is a different word for "choose" that is used here than in our text. Actually there are several different words that Paul and the other New Testament writers use to describe this doctrine of election, or predestination. Another word was used to describe the same idea at the beginning of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. In #1 v. 4 (1 THESSALONIANS 1:4) the apostle wrote, **"For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you..."** Besides the reference to being chosen, we see the mention again that Christians are loved by God the Father. Keep in mind that these Thessalonians were new Christians. Yet Paul expected them to have an understanding of the doctrine of election.

This is not a doctrine that only Paul taught. Other New Testament writers spoke about it. We have frequently referred to the Book of Revelation in our study of the Thessalonian epistles. In particular we have looked at #13. John in his vision of the future comes at this predestination thing in a slightly different way. In #13 he is describing the Antichrist in terms of a beast. (REVELATION 13:8) In v. 8 he says, **"...and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain."** So here this election thing is described in the imagery of a book in which the names of God's chosen ones are inscribed before the foundation of the world.

Christians today often regard this doctrine as controversial and upsetting. But Paul in our verse sees it as a source of comfort. (PROJECTOR OFF) In troubled times Christians should take comfort in knowing that they are loved by Christ. They are also chosen by the Father. This choice cannot have anything to do with any worthiness or lack of worthiness on our part. For it was a choice that was made by Him before the world began. So we are secure. No matter how tough things get, we can be assured that we are loved by Christ and that we have been chosen by the Father. He will not let us go. He will not forget us.

Why did God the Father choose us? Because He loved us. Why did He love us? For that there is no explanation. He just did. It is a mystery. That could be upsetting to us. But it can also be reassuring. Our status with Him is not dependent upon what we do or say. He loves us.

We sometimes speak about our individual spiritual journey and we talk about how we find God or how we found Christ. Our text suggests that it is really God who finds us. He chooses us and uses circumstances and people and situations to get our attention and to draw us to Himself.

Verse 13 in our passage says that God chose us "**to be saved.**" Saved from what? The preceding context talked about the judgment of God that lies in the future when Christ returns. Verse 12 spoke of condemnation that awaits those who do not believe the truth of the gospel. Verse 10 speaks of unbelievers who are dying and who "**refused to love the truth and so be saved.**" So the salvation in view in our passage seems to involve the future judgment of God.

Verse 13 also identifies something about the instrumentality of this salvation. It says that it is "**through sanctification by the Spirit.**" We looked at this sanctification thing in #5 of 1 Thessalonians. I pointed out that the term literally means "to make holy." The term "holy" means "to be set apart," in this case to God. The positional aspect of holiness is that we are set apart to God at the moment that we put our trust in Christ. This qualifies us to be called "saints," or "holy ones." At the moment of this transformation we are made part of the family of God and we are headed to heaven. In the meantime God develops our character and changes our behavior. This is the progressive aspect of sanctification. God's Spirit is at work within us to make us more like Jesus in our character and behavior.

In v. 13 Paul seems to be focusing on the positional aspect of sanctification. At the moment that we trusted in Christ we were saved from eternal judgment, and we were set aside to God. Paul says that this is accomplished by the Spirit.

Jesus spoke about this aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room the evening before His arrest and crucifixion. In John's Gospel (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 16:8) Jesus is quoted as saying, "**And**

when he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment..." It is the Holy Spirit who shows us our sin and our need for righteousness and the danger of judgment. He is involved in setting us aside for the God who is really there.

The human responsibility in all of this is mentioned at the end of the verse. There is "**belief in the truth.**" (PROJECTOR OFF) We are responsible to believe the gospel about Jesus. We do not have to worry about whether we are among God's elect. If we simply believe in Jesus, we can be confident that we are part of God's chosen people.

Then in v. 14 Paul says, "**To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" It was the preaching by Paul and his coworkers at Thessalonica that introduced these people to the gospel of Christ. For the people who responded in a positive way this was not just an invitation. It was a certain call. Their response was certain because of God's love and choice of them from eternity past. In v. 24 of #5 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 THESSALONIANS 5:24) in 1 Thessalonians Paul wrote, "**He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**" It was certain that they would believe.

The purpose of this effectual call is that they will obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Given the context in this chapter, it would seem that the glory that Paul has in mind is the *parousia*, the coming of Jesus Christ, especially His coming to earth at the end of the tribulation. (PROJECTOR OFF) For He will be accompanied by the saints. Evil will be defeated. Jesus Christ will come as a conquering king. He will proceed to establish His kingdom upon the earth.

Look back in #1 in our book and notice v. 10. There Paul writes, "**...when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.**" It will be a glorious time that we can hardly imagine.

The position of the Thessalonian Christians then, and our position now, is heirs in waiting. We are children of God who will receive our inheritance in the future. In the meantime we experience hardships. We deal with health problems like cancer. Some Christians like the Thessalonians deal with persecution. All of us have spiritual battles. We need to persevere. We need to remember our position in Christ. We are eternally secure, and we have hope for a wonderful future.

In Romans #8 v. 18 (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 8:18) the Apostle Paul says, "**For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.**" In spite of the challenges that we face the future looks glorious.

III.

Verse 15 tells us that IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLED TIMES CHRISTIANS NEED TO OBEY GOD'S WORD. (III. IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLED TIMES...) The apostle writes, "**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 verbs of command here. In the midst of troubled times Christians are to stand firm and hold to the traditions taught by the apostles. According to v. 2 the Thessalonian Christians had been shaken as a result of exposure to false teaching. In troubled times Christians need to hang in there. They need to stand firm.

They also need to hold onto traditions. The original Greek word literally means "things handed down." There are two kinds of things handed down which are identified in the Bible. One kind of tradition is the traditions of men. They were the object of criticism from Jesus and the apostles. In Mark #7 Jesus and His disciples were criticized for not following a particular religious ritual before they ate. Jesus responded (MARK 7:8) by saying to the Pharisees who had made up these traditions, "**You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.**"

The traditions that Paul is talking about in our verse is the teaching that the Thessalonians have received from Paul and his coworkers. This is apostolic doctrine. This is the true Word of God. They received some of it by spoken word when Paul was there in person. (PROJECTOR OFF) They received some of it by letter when Paul sent them his first letter. Now he is sending them another one. There was no New Testament yet. So Christians needed discernment in determining what was truly the Word of God. The doctrine that Christians were taught by the apostles was the standard that was to be used in determining what was genuine.

In our day there is much pressure that our culture places upon us Christians to compromise the traditions that we have received from the written Word of God. This is especially true in regard to social issues like abortion and sexuality and marriage and divorce. A couple of weeks ago a prominent pastor and author was interviewed by Religious News Service. He was asked if he would ever officiate at a same-sex wedding. He said that he would, explaining, "**I know a lot of people who are gay and lesbian and they seem to have as good a spiritual life as I do.**"

A day later after receiving criticism from other evangelical leaders, he seemed to backtrack. There are other leaders who claim to be evangelicals who have not backtracked on this issue. The justification that they often seem to use is that they have friends or relatives who are sincere Christians and should not be held back from same-sex marriage. This is where our obligation is to stand firm and not buy into the traditions of people. We have to get our standards from God's Word.

IV.

In vv. 16 & 17 we are taught that IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLED TIMES CHRISTIANS NEED TO PRAY FOR MUTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLED TIMES...) Paul prays, **"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."**

Paul speaks of God the Father and God the Son. Usually he speaks of God the Father first. But here Christ, with His full title, is mentioned first. Perhaps this is as an intentional contrast to the Antichrist, who is identified in the earlier verses as the source of evil in the coming tribulation.

After speaking of God the Father Paul switches to the singular verb, suggesting that God the Father is now in focus. God the Father loved us. How has He done that? Well certainly in sending us the Son. But in our passage the focus in v. 13 was in His choice of us in eternity past in which He began the process that would result in our sanctification.

He has also given us eternal comfort. What is needed for the Thessalonian Christians in a time of persecution, what is needed for us in troubled times, is comfort. Part of this comfort relates to hope, hope that recognizes that justice is coming and that we will participate in future glory which involves the return of Jesus Christ.

Thus Paul next mentions "good hope." This was an expression that was often used by ancient Greek writers to refer to life after death. But the nature of life after death was very uncertain for most of them. One of their more hopeless writers, a man by the name of Theognis, wrote, **"Best of all for mortals is never to have been born, but for those who have been born to die as soon as possible."** Not much hope there.

Christians have a certain hope. Paul refers to it as a hope that is based upon grace. Our status as members of the family of God and Christians headed for a glorious future is not based upon any merit in us.

Then comes the actual prayer in v. 17 that God the Father may comfort hearts and establish them in every good work and word. God is supernaturally involved in bringing us this experience of comfort and motivation for good works and words. Paul is also an example for us in our need to pray for fellow Christians in the midst of troubled times. We need to pray that we all will be able to express this confidence and hope in the midst of troubled times in our word and work, in our saying and doing, in our talk and walk.

In Psalm 73 the psalmist expressed the same heart cry of our passage centuries earlier. (PSALM 73:25) He wrote, "**Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.** (PSALM 73:26) **My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.** (PSALM 73:27) **For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.** (PSALM 73:28) **But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works."**

That is our job, even in the midst of troubled times. We are to focus on our Creator and Redeemer. We are to maintain hope in Him. We are to point others to the glorious God who gives us hope. (BEGIN VIDEO) For He is the Creator and the Artist who deserves our worship.

{Four minute video that shows scenes of God's creative work. Narrator talks about how God is the great Artist who allows us to enter into His work. The encouragement is not to take too much attention for our work. Rather as the followers of the God who is there we should bring attention to His work and enter into His praise.}