

## 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

### Introduction

This past week, Brighton & Hove City Council have warned people not to use QR codes when paying for parking. These codes have been appearing on pay-and-display machines in the town. And it's a scam. The codes claim to direct people to a legitimate website, where they can pay for their parking. But they don't. Instead, they direct people to a bogus website, which is being used to scam people out of their money. It's a very modern version of an ancient problem.

Last week, we saw that Paul wrote at length about the danger of being scammed in the Christian life. False teaching was circulating that appeared to come from the apostles. But it didn't. It was fake. So, Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica to warn them not to be taken in. He didn't want the church there to be unsettled. And well they might be. Not only were fraudsters troubling them. They were also being persecuted for their faith by the people who lived around them. It would be understandable if they were anxious about losing their salvation. They might fear that their faith wouldn't be strong enough to withstand the relentless persecution they were facing. But even if it was, they might fear that they would fall for a scam and lose everything. It would be understandable if they were anxious.

But these verses, that we're looking at this morning, are full of comfort and encouragement. Paul wants them to know that they are secure. They have no need to be anxious as they wait for Jesus to return. And Paul points them to God's character and actions as the source of confidence in the Christian life. Paul wants them to know, firstly, that they are loved, chosen and called. That's our first heading: You are loved, chosen, called.

### You are loved, chosen, called

Please look down again at verses 13 and 14. Once again, Paul speaks of his thankfulness for the Christians in Thessalonica. He writes this:

**But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

These verses are so encouraging. Paul wants the Christians in Thessalonica to know that he's completely confident about their salvation. He has no doubts at all about their perseverance in the faith, despite the many trials they are enduring. And that's all because of God.

The first thing he wants them to know is that they are loved.

If you know yourself to be a sinner, that can be one of the hardest things to believe. The Christian life begins with a new awareness of sin. It begins when God opens our eyes to see how wretched and sinful we truly are. And as the Christian life goes on, our awareness of sin only increases. It's not that we become more sinful. But we become more aware of the sin that lurks in our hearts. And when you know yourself to be a sinner, one of the hardest things to believe is that God loves you.

But that's what Paul wants the Christian in Thessalonica to know. And it's what he wants us to know. We are loved by the Lord. If you're a Christian here this morning, he wants you to drink that truth in. He wants you to delight in it. Tim Chester, in his book, *Enjoying God*, has a lovely phrase for it. He says that we need to sunbathe in God's love and feel the warmth of it. You are loved by the Lord. And, amazingly, if you're a Christian here this morning, God first expressed his love for you way back in eternity past, before the beginning of time, by choosing you to be saved. Do you see that, in verse 13?

**But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.**

What the Bible says about God's choosing, or his electing, of some and not others for salvation is something that many Christians find troubling. It's a subject that Christians love to argue about. Paul, on the other hand, thanks God for it. He draws comfort and strength from it. He wants the believers in Thessalonica to know that their faith depends, in the first place, on God. In eternity past, God chose them to be saved. That is a truth that should bring comfort to all of us.

If it depended on you and me to keep trusting in Jesus through all the trials we face, we would have every reason to be fearful and anxious. We might well give up. We might well be drawn away from Christ by false teachers. But because our salvation depends not on us but on God, we can be confident that he will finish what he has started.

And that sovereign choice, in eternity past, is something the believer experiences in two ways. Do you see that? **But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved *through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth*** – in other words, through faith in the gospel. Paul's emphasising both God's role and our role in salvation. The work of the Spirit and our profession of faith go hand-in-hand.

When you became a Christian, did you decide to follow Jesus? Yes, you did. And it was a real decision. It was *your* decision. You own that decision. But it's the sanctifying work of the Spirit that enabled you to make that decision. If you're a Christian, here this morning, your decision to trust in Jesus was the direct result of God's choosing of you and the Spirit's sanctifying work in you.

God didn't choose you because you believed ...or even because he knew in advance that you would believe. You believed because, in eternity past, God chose you. And in verse 14, Paul describes how this happened in your own experience, if you're a believer. God expressed his love for you not only by choosing you in eternity past, but also by calling you to faith in Jesus in time and history.

**Verse 14. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

God's sovereign choice in eternity past became real in your own personal experience when you heard and responded to the gospel. At a certain point in time, or perhaps, over a certain period of time, God called you. And through the work of the Spirit in your heart, you responded with faith. The fact of your faith in Jesus, today, is the result of God setting his love upon you in eternity past. And God's choice in eternity past secures your joy in eternity future.

**He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

This is the destination of everyone who has heard and believed the gospel. When Jesus returns, all his people will share his glory forever. We will finally experience, fully and permanently, the unending joy of being loved as sons and daughters of the living God. We will be members of God's family, in union with his Son, Jesus Christ, through the sanctifying work of his Spirit. That has been God's loving intention from eternity past. If you belong to Jesus, it's what God has called you to, through hearing and believing the good news of the gospel. If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, God may be calling you to this even now. It's the destination that he has in store for all his people. And nothing can stop it.

And that's why Paul thanks God. Paul keeps asserting God's sovereignty in this letter. And here, once again, he's emphasising God's total sovereignty over salvation, from beginning to end. And God's sovereignty *over* salvation is grounds for our assurance *of* salvation.

Imagine a child riding home on his father's shoulders. His safe arrival at home is wholly dependent on his father. It might start raining. The wind might start blowing. A crowd of people might jostle them. A dog might bark at them. But as long as the father remains stable, then the child will be safe and secure until they arrive home.

Our heavenly Father is steadfast and stable. Nothing can thwart his loving purpose for his people. No scheme of Satan can derail it. No power can prevent us from arriving safely home. We have been loved and chosen by God in eternity past. We have been called by God, in time and history, through the preaching of the gospel. And no matter what trials we go through, he will keep us safe and secure until that day when we share Christ's glory for ever and ever.

That's why Paul's so thankful. And that's why he exhorts the believers in Thessalonica to hold fast. And that's our second heading: Hold fast.

### Hold fast

Please look down again at verse 15.

**So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.**

Those words might seem surprising. After all Paul's just said about *God's* sovereignty and *our* security, we might expect him to say, 'So then, brothers and sisters, relax. Take it easy. You're in good hands.' But he doesn't. Rather than sitting down and putting our feet up, he says, stand firm! Rather than relaxing and taking it easy, he says, hold fast!

On 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1987, newspapers across America ran stories of a man called Henry Dempsey. He was a pilot. And he'd been flying a commuter plane near Boston when he heard a rattle coming from the back. He turned the controls over to his co-pilot and went to check it out. As he was doing so, the plane hit some turbulence. He was thrown against the passenger door, which popped open, and he was sucked out of the plane. There were no passengers. And assuming he had plunged to his death, the co-pilot asked to make an emergency landing. It took 10 minutes to land the plane. And when he finally got it down, an emergency crew met him.

What they found stunned them. Henry Dempsey hadn't plunged to his death. Somehow, he had managed to cling to a ladder that was attached to the open passenger door and had held on at speeds of up to 200 mph for the whole 10 minutes it had taken to land. When the crew got to him, they said his fingers had to be pried off that ladder. He'd been holding on for dear life.

Paul's saying that we're to be like Henry Dempsey. It's through the gospel that God has called us, so that we might share in the glory of Christ. So, he says, hold fast!

We're secure. God is sovereign over our salvation from beginning to end. We don't need to be anxious about the future, whatever it may hold. But God's sovereignty doesn't take away our responsibility to hold on to the gospel message. It's through faith in this gospel, that God has saved us. So, we're to hold fast and not let go.

And it's important to note that this gospel message is something the apostles have simply passed on. Do you see that in verse 15?

**So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings *we passed on to you...***

The gospel didn't originate with the Paul and the other apostles. It's from God. They have merely passed on the message they received from Jesus. Others may tell us that the teachings of the apostles are old fashioned and out of date. They may say that the church has moved on. That the Spirit is leading us into new truth. But we mustn't be deceived. The message the apostles have passed on doesn't have a human origin but a divine one. It comes with divine authority for all time. And our salvation is secure as long as we hold fast to it. The way to resist false teaching is to cling to true teaching for all we're worth.

So, Paul ends with a prayer. He not only exhorts the Christians in Thessalonica to stand firm and hold fast, he prays that God will enable them to do so. It's a prayer for encouragement and strengthening. And that's our final heading.

### A prayer for encouragement and strengthening

Verses 16 and 17.

**May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.**

Paul's returning to the theme that runs all the way through this letter. The good hope of the believer is certain hope. It's the knowledge that when Jesus returns, we will be with him forever and share his glory. When he comes again, we will be gathered to him. We will marvel at the splendour of his coming. And we will share his glory on that day and forevermore. It's all by God's grace, Paul says. We haven't earned it. We don't need to work for it. It's God's loving kindness to undeserving sinners. And it's *this* hope concerning the future that should bring us eternal encouragement and sustain us in the present.

In 1488, a Portuguese explorer called Bartolomeu Dias led the first European expedition to round the southern tip of Africa. Because of the weather he encountered there, he called it the Cape of Storms. However, despite its reputation for fierce winds and stormy seas, Portugal's King John II renamed it. He could see what lay beyond the storms. He could see that this cape was the gateway from Europe to India and to great riches. So he called it the Cape of Good Hope.

By his grace, God has given us eternal encouragement and good hope. We may face stormy waters now, but we can do so knowing that we are loved by God. And we can look beyond them with confidence to the glorious future and incomparable riches we have in Christ. And, Paul says, that hope should spur us on to live for Christ's glory now, in every area of our lives.

That's why Paul prays as he does. He doesn't want the believers in Thessalonica to be inactive. He wants them to lead busy lives that reflect the hope they have and bring glory to God.

The Christian life is secure. But it's also to be busy. It's not about sitting around contemplating the blessings God has given us. It's about living out those blessings in every sphere of life... using our time and energy to serve Christ... at church, at home, at work, with family and friends, and in the community... all to the glory of his name. That might sound like a big deal. We might wonder how we can possibly manage it. But that's why Paul prays.

We need the encouragement and strengthening that God the Spirit provides. It's the encouragement and strengthening that comes from God the Father, through faith in the gospel of his Son, Jesus Christ. That's what Paul prayed for the Christians in Thessalonica. And it's what we can pray for one another. Let's do that now.

Let's pray.

Loving, heavenly Father, thank you for the love you set upon us in eternity past, when you chose us to be saved, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through faith in the cross of your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for the certain hope we have of a glorious future, when he returns, and we share his glory. As we wait for that day to come, help us to hold fast to the teachings passed down to us by the apostles. Encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word, no matter what struggles we may face. And help us to live for your glory in every sphere of our lives. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.