

2 Thessalonians 2:1-17

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[0 : 00] Sometimes things happen in life that shake us up, don't they? Like when you're driving down the mesway, and you see on the other carriageway,! Doubts suddenly assail us out of nowhere.

Work gets difficult. Kids go off the rails. They seem to reject the gospel. All these things can shake us up, don't they? Makes us ask where our confidence really lies.

What hope is there for us to endure and persevere when life can be so difficult? When strange things can happen to us? Well, that was sort of true of the Thessalonians.

They'd had their cages rattled. For a start, they were under great persecution. They had been ever since the church being planted there, which was probably only about a year or 18 months before this letter was written. Not only that, verse 2 of chapter 2, we hear this false teaching had come, saying, actually, the Lord Jesus has come back already, and you missed it.

So they were anxious. They were worried. You know, what is truth? What can we trust in? And then Paul, in answering that concern in the first half of chapter 2, had explained to them that Jesus hasn't come back yet, because things are going to get a lot worse before he does.

[1 : 31] To cut a long story short. The man of lawlessness will come. He will lead many people astray. So look at verse 7, actually. He'd already said that even though the man of lawlessness hasn't come yet, the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.

In other words, Satan is already at work, seeking to deceive God's people. And it's going to be powerful deception. Verse 11. Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Now, can you imagine sitting there in a church in Thessalonica, as that is read out, and you're panicking about whether you've missed Jesus coming back, you're panicking about the society around you, hating you, and now you're Paul saying, a whole load of people are going to be deceived, and judged and condemned.

How would you feel? I think it'd be more shocking than seeing the car smash on the other carriageway, wouldn't it? So what does Paul do?

The great pastor that he is, he sets out to reassure them. Look at the first word of our passage, the first word of verse 13. But, but, there is something better for you, Thessalonians.

[2 : 45] He wants to encourage them, make them stable and assure them. And so he does that by doing three things. He tells them there's something to celebrate, something to hold on to, and something to experience.

First of all, something to celebrate. See his prayer there in verse 13, he is celebrating God's grace in their lives. Verse 13, but, in contrast to those who are condemned, in contrast to those in verse 11, who get a strong delusion from God, in contrast to that, we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, beloved by the Lord.

The Thessalonians may feel like second-rate Christians. They may think that confusions and anxieties, but that the, from the false teaching, makes them second-rate. So Paul reassures them, I'm under obligation to thank God for what he's done in your life.

I'm not just trying to be nice to you, I'm not just flattering you, it's a debt I owe to God. We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, beloved by God. A lot of that's true in our own experience, isn't it?

We can't see what God is doing in our own lives, what God has done. It's so reassuring to hear others praising God for the work they see God doing in us. That's why Paul is praising God here.

[4 : 05] There is something to celebrate. They are beloved by God. And two things particularly Paul is celebrating. God has chosen them and God has called them. These are things worth celebrating for, they say.

So verse 13, because God chose you, he's thanking God for that choice. It comes entirely by God's grace. Now how does Paul know they've been chosen?

How can anyone see into the secret councils of God to see who God's elect are? Well, there's evidence, Paul says. Look how he goes on in verse 13. God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

That word sanctification basically means set apart. You've been set apart, Thessalonians, from the world around you. How do I know? Because you've believed in the truth. You've believed in the truth.

Naturally, none of us would believe the truth of the gospel. We are not capable of believing it ourselves. The evidence of God's choice, and if that's the way he has rising our lives, is his belief in the truth.

[5 : 12] And that's a contrast to the people in verse 10. See what Paul had said about the rest of the world in verse 10? With all wicked deception they receive for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

Naturally, as human beings, we will not love the truth. It is God's grace, the work of the Spirit, that sanctifies, sending us apart. So we don't refuse the truth, but rather love the truth and believe the truth.

And Paul also mentions God's evidence, God's self-purpose in Corinth and there in verse 13. God chose you as firstfruits to be saved. Now, saved sounds like a very Christian word, isn't it?

A word we often use. What does it mean? You get very blase about it. But actually being saved in the New Testament, includes everything that every human being really wants.

Though we all want to know there is a way to be good again, as a tagline to the film *The Kite Runner* put it. There's a way for our past not to hold against us. Well, that's part of what it is to be saved, to be forgiven, to be saved, to be right clean.

[6 : 23] Though we want to know there is a way to be made whole, when it all seems frustrating and broken. That is part of what it is to be saved. We'll be part of a new creation.

We'll be made into the people God always intended us to be. We have no more suffering and illness. Doesn't every human being want to know we're loved at the deepest level?

Whatever we've done. That is part of what it is to be saved, to be adopted into God's family, to be beloved children. So it's not just a Christian jargon.

It is a precious truth. God has chosen them to have all that, to be saved. Not only that, there are first fruits to be saved, as Paul puts it here. Now in the Old Testament, the first fruits did two things.

There was a first part of the harvest in agricultural terms, and the first fruits guaranteed that the rest of the harvest was coming. So on one level he's saying to the Thessalonians, you're just the beginning.

[7 : 26] God's chosen you at the start, there are going to be many more coming in. But secondly, the first fruits in the Old Testament always had to be set apart for God, offered to the Lord as a sacrifice of praise.

They belonged to God. And so it is for the Thessalonians. He chose you to be saved, he chose you to particularly belong to him as the first fruits of it. So that's why Paul's celebrating.

You've been chosen. And not only chosen, secondly, verse 14, you've been called. So this, he, God, called you through our gospel so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

See, God's call is always effective. When I was a teenager I had a dog, we had a dog as a family, I'd often go on the beach with our dog who's predictably called Rex. I had a call for hours and hours and hours and he would run away and do whatever he wanted to do.

God's call is not like that. God's call is effectual. As the gospel message goes out and is preached, God will cause it to be effective in the lives of his people.

[8 : 31] And that's what happened to the Thessalonians. And did you notice what it was? It was through our gospel, Paul says. That message you heard from me, either in writing or from my mouth while I was with you, that is the means that the Holy Spirit used to cause you to believe, to make God's call effectual in your life.

And what was the purpose of doing that? End of verse 14, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus. But when the risen Lord Jesus comes back, those who have believed in him will be like him.

We will share in his glory, in his completeness, in his perfection, in his resurrected body. That's God's purpose. That's where he's taking you, Thessalonians.

That's where he's taking us, believers in the evening. We have chosen, we are called. And see how encouraging that is for beleaguered Christian under pressures from the authorities, anxious about the false teaching they're hearing.

And isn't it good news in our lives as well? What's going to help us persevere? What's going to keep us to the end? Not the sense of our own self-worth, not our own strength and endurance, but God's work of grace in our lives.

[9 : 43] Do you notice how all three were persons in the Trinity are involved in this? The Son has died for us. We're going to attain the glory of the Son. We've been set apart by the Spirit.

We've been chosen by God the Father. We are secure if we have believed the truth. And I wonder how you feel about that doctrine of election, that doctrine of God's choosing people.

For some of us, we think, well, is God fair? Is that really fair that God would do that? And yet, who of us really wants God to be fair?

I think I've used the story before of being stopped by a police car one time. And I thought I was riding while I was calling to the speed limit. I was doing pretty well. I wanted the policeman to be fair to me.

Once I got into the conversation and he told me it's minus 10 out here, you're not driving it away commensurate with road conditions. Once he told me my front headlight was out and my rear brake light wasn't working, I thought at that point I wanted mercy, not fairness.

[10 : 45] And so it is with God. As we realise how we've treated the creator of the world, as we realise how we've rejected the one who gave us life, as we realise how we've abused him and abused people made in his image, we realise we don't want God to treat us with fairness.

We want him to treat us with grace. And that's what God does. He gave his own son to take the punishment that everyone deserves.

He will always be just. Either Jesus takes the punishment or those who reject Jesus will take the punishment. Every sin gets punished.

God is always just. But he's also gracious. He provides a way of escape. But what do we make of this? Well, this doctrine of election, this doctrine of God choosing us is not, to borrow a phrase from a Scottish preacher, it's not a bomb to be dropped or a banner to be waved but a bastion to be leaned on.

It's not a bomb to be dropped to scare people, to frighten people. It's not a banner to be waved. Look at us, we've got this doctrine. Come and join us. Rather, it's a bastion to be leaned on.

[11 : 58] It's something to give comfort and encouragement when the doubts come, when hard times come. It's certainly nothing to be proud of. There's no boast in here, is there? If it's all God's work and God's choice, there's nothing to boast about.

God doesn't love us because of anything in us, because of anything we have done or anything we will do. He loves us because he loves us. That's what he said to his people in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy chapter 7, verse 7, Moses speaking to Israel said, it was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and shows you.

For you, the fewest of all peoples. But, it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he taught your fathers. God loves you. Why?

Because he loves you. Paul says there's something to celebrate. Celebrating God's grace in their lives. That's one way they can have encouragement amidst the disappointments and the worries and the persecutions.

[12 : 59] As well as something to celebrate, there's something to hold on to. Look at verse 15.

Perhaps it would be a temptation to think, well, if God has done all this, then I can just sit back, fold my arms, it doesn't matter what I do, I'm going to be in glory one day.

That's not what Paul says. Verse 15, he comes with a command. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you are taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

As if Paul is picturing these poor believers on a boat in a storm. The wind blowing, the waves tossing them around. And they go, hold on, hold on firm to the safety line.

And they keep their feet standing in a safe place. And also, Paul is giving this command, hold fast, stand firm. And what is it there to hold fast to?

What is it there to stand on? What is this safe place, the safety line? It is the traditions that you are taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. Now, traditions don't get a good press these days, do we?

[13:59] I mean, who wants to be traditional? Most people would rather be progressive, wouldn't we? That's the kind of language people use these days. You don't want to be a sort of Luddite like me who isn't even on Twitter yet.

I was rebuked for that yesterday. You want to be progressive. You want to be up with the trends. And so it is. Who likes traditional religion? A neighbour told me a few months ago, I'm not really against God.

Those don't like traditional, organised religion. Well, it's very progressive. Paul says, what you need, what you need is the traditions. See, something can be progressive, but actually, it is taking you further away from where you need to be, that it's not progressive at all.

It's deadly. It's a disaster. When Paul is calling them to the traditions, that's not the traditions of the church. It's not the traditions that humans teach and traditions of their culture.

It's the traditional message about Christ. It's what Paul taught them. So back in verse 2, he says, don't worry about this new stuff you're hearing. That's not from us. You need to hold on to the traditions, to what I taught you when I was with you.

[15:06] Our gospel, as he puts it in verse 14. In contrast to verse 2, it says, do not be shaken in mind and alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word.

Cling on, hold fast, stand firm to the spoken word, to the apostolic message, to those traditions you've heard. You see, there's a specific truth, specific content that they are to believe.

It's not just keep having belief, it's believe this, hold this. There's a particular message they're not to move from. Again, that's a sharp contrast to today, isn't it?

I just listened to a CD in our car the other day, Mumford and Sons, I don't know which song it was, but one of the lines was, how can you say your truth is better than mine? And that sums up the way people think.

How can you possibly say your truth is better than mine? I don't know the context of the songs, I don't know whether it's an ironic expression or not. But that's what people think. What's important, people will say, is sincerity.

[16:05] If they really believe that, that's great. If you had friends say to you, I'm really glad you go to church, that's good for you. I'm not really into that, but if you're sincere about that, that's lovely. I'm really into my Buddhist meditation or into my horoscopes.

That helps me. Glad you've got something to help you. What they're saying is that what you believe doesn't matter, it's just believing something that matters. But that's not true, is it?

In all walks of life, the act of believing something isn't so important, it's the content of what you believe is important. Many years ago, I was on a business trip in Rome. It was nice on a business trip in Rome, I enjoyed that.

And we were having breakfast one morning, and I had to go for a meeting at the office earlier with many of my colleagues. They said, well, do you want to go ride with us? No, I've got to go earlier. Do you know where you're going? Yes, I've got the address written down. So I went down, out of the hotel lobby, got a taxi, gave the taxi driver the address that I'd taken from the company directory, and off we went.

And I started to get a little nervous as the journey went on. And at the point at which I realised Rome was being replaced by green fields around me, and all the buildings were back in the distance, I was getting pretty panicked.

[17:15] I didn't have a mobile phone, I didn't speak any Italian. And finally, we arrived at a big factory outside Rome. And the muggers that I am, I'd written down the wrong address of the company directory.

Thankfully there, they knew where I needed to be and sent me back to the office in the city. So instead of arriving early for my meeting, I was about two hours late, with a hundred euro bill or something to pay.

Well, the company paid that, thankfully. The point is, I wasn't progressing, was I? It wasn't that I had some progressive idea. Every minute I was travelling out of Rome, I was getting further from where

I needed to be.

And what was the problem? The problem was that while I sincerely believed I had the right address, and I confidently told my colleagues I had it, I was wrong. My faith was misplaced.

Paul is saying, you need to have the right directions. You need to hold on to traditions you've been taught, not your own ideas, not the new things coming in. Do not be deceived. So keep holding on to the truth, he's saying.

[18:18] And in the original language it had that direct idea of keep on doing it, don't stop doing it. It's like when you're a bumpy tube train, you keep on holding on to the handles because you're flung around the carriage.

Keep holding on, Paul says. Now how do we do that? How do we do that? How do we keep holding on to God's truth? Well, he's coming back to it all the time, doesn't it?

Day by day, week by week, coming back to God's truth, not just assuming we know it. It's like if you've ever worked in a laboratory or something, as I have done in the past, all the measuring devices need to be recalibrated regularly to make sure they're still right, to make sure they're still telling the truth.

So we need to come back consistently to God's truth. Individually, as a church, we need to keep coming so we don't drift from the truth. And we need to do that generation by generation as well. It's so easy for the truth to be lost, isn't it? You know what it's like in a relay race? Where can it all go wrong in a relay race? It's a changeover, isn't it? The baton gets dropped and being passed.

[19:25] So it's from generation to generation it's easy for the truth to drift. Let me give a little illustration of this. It's easy for one generation to use some words rather loosely because they know the caveats in their own mind.

For example, the phrase worship leader. We all know that Jesus is our worship leader really, that's what Hebrews 2 tells us. So even when churches talk about having a worship leader, we really know that's just the person who leads the music and Jesus is actually the worship leader.

The next generation comes along and they still use that word, worship leader, but they no longer have the theology behind it. So what happens? Well, they can just go on using it.

But gradually a bit of a shift comes. So when the third generation comes along they use the term but they don't have any of the caveats so they fill it with new content. And so suddenly the worship leader gets talked about or the person who leads us into God's presence.

The person who brings the Holy Spirit down for us so we can really feel God among us. And what's happened? They drifted from the truth. Jesus is no longer the one who brings us into God's presence.

[20:35] He's suddenly created a new priesthood. A priesthood fuelled by music as it were. So we need to hold to the truth coming back time by time again recalibrating retuning like a musical instrument to make sure we're still in line with the truth.

So here's Paul celebrating God's grace in the Thessalonians life encouraging the need to hold to God's truth. But how is that possible? In a world that hates the idea of truth.

In a world where you are a bigot if you believe truth. How is it possible to hold on to the truth? Well we see that in verses 16 and 17.

We need to experience God's power to do it. Verse 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 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

See what this prayer is based on? It's based on God's past action in their life. God has loved us. The Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our father who loved us and gave us eternal hope.

[21:48] Given what God has done in the past will he not comfort you and empower you for the future? And what's he already given? Eternal comfort. A true comfort that will last forever that will not just wear out with the seasons.

The comfort of the gospel. He's given us a good hope. The genuine expectation of a glorious resurrection life in the new creation. With the relationship with God fully restored.

All we were made for. Fully experienced at last. And these are gifts. These are things that have been given. He loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope. Nothing we've owned.

God gives it to us by his grace. The end of the verse. Grace is God's abundant goodness to those who have no hope of any good thing without him. God's abundant goodness to those who have no hope of any good thing without him.

Paul says that's what God has already given. That's the fuel for his prayer. But do you notice who this prayer is to? To the Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father. Now most times when Paul uses those two names together he does the other way around.

[23 : 00] It's the Father first, the Son second. Why does he put the Son first here? Could it possibly be because of the Son's first hand experience as a man of the need to be comforted?

The needs we've strengthened? The Lord Jesus Christ resisted Satan's lies and deceptions when he was in the wilderness being tempted. The Lord Jesus endured rejection, persecution, even death on a cross.

Isn't he the sort of one who can comfort and reassure us with his own experience as our high priest? And what is Paul praying for here anyway?

Well he's asking for two things. He's asking for inward comfort and the outward evidence of what God is doing. He's really asking that we'll experience God's power, isn't he? That God will comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

So comfort is the inner comfort and the outward evidence the good works and good words. So Jesus can give that inner comfort having been through worse experiences than them.

[24 : 07] But how else do we materially get that comfort? Is it just something that immediately comes from God? In a supernatural way? Well certainly there's truth in that. But that's not the only way comfort comes.

In Romans chapter 15 verse 4, Paul uses almost the same words in saying this. Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and encouragement that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. is the word comfort, that word translated encouragement in Romans chapter 15 is the same word translated comfort here in 2 Thessalonians.

So what Paul is saying is you get comfort, you get encouragement through the scriptures. That's what God, that's the instrument of grace God uses in your life to give you comfort and encouragement in the midst of the maelstrom.

Of course there's another way God brings comfort and encouragement as well not just through the written scriptures but through the visible word. That's a night as we partake in the Lord's Supper. As we eat the bread and drink the wine he gives us inward comfort, internal comfort and encouragement that we are his.

[25 : 29] So inner comfort and then the outward evidence. The second thing Paul prays for is he prays that they will experience God's power. He asks the Lord that he will establish them in every good work and word.

He will strengthen and build up their speech and their actions. So all they do, people will look back and say that is the grace of God at work in their lives. And we need that don't we?

We need to experience God's power day by day that in all the things that come at us we know him establishing us, building us up in our works and words that they may honour him.

So what is the antidote to the Thessalonians anxiety? What could be the antidote to our anxieties whenever we face in life? Our uncertainty about the future? Ultimately it all rests on God's love doesn't it?

That's how Paul has described them. Brothers, you're beloved by God, verse 13. Verse 16, he loved us and gave us eternal comfort.

[26 : 28] We are loved by God. This love that goes back from before the dawn of time and it will never end throughout eternity. So Paul says, here's the ultimate cure. Knowing God's love, you can celebrate God's grace.

He's loved you, he's chosen you, he's called you. You can hold on to God's truth which he's given you. And you're able to do that by experiencing God's empowering. He is the God who has called you and will keep you.

Be sure. Let's pray.