

Standfast

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

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*The Lord's Day Evening
November 8, 2009*

If you have your Bibles, let me encourage you to turn to the epistle of 2 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians. This is one of Paul's letters to us, the church, to encourage us in the faith; lots of tremendous instruction to gain in this beautiful letter. We'll be looking at just a small section of it tonight. Before we read God's Word, let's go to Him in prayer and ask for His blessing.

Our Father in heaven, it is a great privilege to gather on a Lord's Day evening, after a day of worship and a day of rest, to come back into Your house, to gather with the saints, to lean in once again to Your Word. Father we ask that You would give us guidance tonight, that You would touch each of our hearts in exactly the place that we need to be touched. We pray that You would use this Word, this eternal Word, this abiding Word, this faithful Word from the apostle Paul to the church at Thessalonica and to us. Help us to learn, O Father, all that You would have us to know, and help us to be faithful to apply the teachings of this Word to our lives. Bless us now we pray, in Jesus name. Amen.

2 Thessalonians chapter 2 - We'll be reading verses 13 to 17 together. This is God's Word:

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. To this He called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 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.

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.

Amen, and thus far the reading of God's holy Word.

I don't know if you've ever asked a question, either to someone verbally or in a written form, a question that arose out of a concern, a question that arose out of

some confusion, and then received an answer from the person in which you solicited an answer, and the answer was more concerning and more confusing than the question. I don't know if that's ever happened to you. It's happened to me on several occasions where I've asked a question of someone, some question I thought was fairly simple, fairly straightforward, and I got back a remarkably complicated and confusing answer — an answer that led to a multitude of other questions.

Such is the story of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. When the apostle writes 1 Thessalonians, this letter to a church that is in its infant stages of the faith, desiring to grow in grace, he writes to them because they are confused and concerned and are misunderstanding several important things regarding the truth of the Gospel, particularly a question regarding what happens when one of your loved ones dies and they are not immediately resurrected. This was concerning to the church at Thessalonica because Paul had written to them and they knew that the resurrection was a part of the gift of the Gospel and they weren't experiencing it. Those who are embracing the faith were dying and not being resurrected. So Paul writes 1 Thessalonians and he communicates to them that the resurrection is about the Second Coming of Christ. There's a great day of resurrection that's going to come. And he talks with them concerning the Great Day of the Lord, or the Judgment Day that is coming. That's the letter of 1 Thessalonians. He's answering their questions.

But of course the church of Thessalonica gets that first letter and well, they misunderstand some of the things that the apostle Paul is trying to say — at least that's the indication we seem to get from the text. Look at what the apostle Paul says, 2 Thessalonians 2 verse 1 and 2, look at what he says — “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” — this is something he has already addressed in the first letter — “and our being gathered together with Him, we ask you brothers 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.” Some confusion, some misunderstanding, possibly connected to Paul's first letter, possibly connected to several teachers in the area surrounding Thessalonica and in the city of Thessalonica, have caused greater confusion among the people of Thessalonica. Their confusion this time, as the apostle Paul writes to them, is that they're worried that the Day of the Lord may have passed them, that they may have missed it, that the action that Paul has talked about regarding the Day of Judgment may have been something that has already happened. So the apostle Paul says, “Oh no, church of Thessalonica, you've misunderstood again. You're not understanding that the Day of the Lord has not yet happened. And here's what I want you to know about the Day of the Lord - before the Day of the Lord comes, there's going to be a rising of a tremendous rebellion on the earth. There's going to be a man that he refers to in the first twelve verses of chapter 2 as a person who is controlled by the activity of Satan, one who is titled ‘the man of lawlessness.’ He's going to rise to ascendancy, just previous to the coming of the Day of the Lord. There's going to be signs and wonders. There's going to be

many false prophets. There are going to be many who are lead astray. Those who are perishing are going to believe him. He's going to claim to be God and he's going to come animated by the activity and the power of Satan himself. So don't think that you've missed the Day of the Lord church of Thessalonica. Those things haven't happened yet. You have nothing to worry about. The Day of the Lord hasn't come."

Okay, you're the church of Thessalonica for a minute. "So you tell me, Apostle Paul, there's going to be a man of lawlessness who's going to have power, the power of Satan himself, and he's going to deceive many people. He's going to come in signs and wonders and you're actually going to give them over to the delusions of their mind. They're going to begin to love unrighteousness and they're going to head straight towards condemnation. And yet you tell me, 'Don't worry church of Thessalonica. You haven't missed the Day of the Lord.'" You see the paradox here? You see the irony of this? The apostle Paul is writing to give stability and comfort to minds that have been shaken by misunderstandings, minds that have been alarmed in worry that they missed the Day of the Lord. The apostle Paul says, "Oh no, there's lots more fireworks to come before the day of the Lord is here."

You can imagine what the church of Thessalonica felt like at the end of verse 12, before verses 13 to 17, which is what we are looking at tonight. Obviously I wanted to choose a passage that would comfort you and not frighten you, because the first twelve verses of 2 Thessalonians 2 are quite frightening. The apostle Paul is writing to a people who are experiencing a sort of spiritual earthquake within the soul. He uses the language of being "shaken," shaken in mind and alarmed.

I don't know how many of you have been in an earthquake. I've never had the privilege myself, but I can imagine, the one thing I'm pretty certain of every day that I get out of the bed that my feet hit the floor, I'm pretty certain that there will be ground there and it won't be moving. I'm also pretty sure of spiritual realities like the sovereign God of the universe, Creator of heaven and earth, and the Lord Jesus Christ and His person and work, and all of the doctrines surrounding the Gospel. I operate and assume these as I live. So did the church at Thessalonica, but the ground of their spiritual stability has been shaken. And Paul is writing to them as a church now in doubt and in fear and in confusion. He writes to them to stabilize them. He wants to bring stability to their instability. He wants to bring confidence to their fear. He wants to bring calm to their alarm. And so he writes the letter of 2 Thessalonians. Now I can only imagine the apostle Paul hopes they get it this time. He's been very patient with them and so he spells it out beautifully in this passage.

Now thinking, as a wise pastor the Apostle Paul, he probably knows that the words he just wrote to them, the first twelve verses of Thessalonians 2 about the Day of the Lord, were hard words, they were difficult words, so he's going to

need to assure them that they are not among those who are deceived. Because wouldn't that be a question that you would have in the back of your mind? "Okay Paul, I've already misunderstood you once, and twice, and you said those who the man of lawlessness will get for himself and lead astray, he will lead them astray be deception, and I sure seem like a person who's easily deceived given the fact that I continue to be confused by the letters that you write. I wonder if I'm one of the ones that the man of lawlessness is going to take down with him?"

And then the beautiful conjunction "but" in verse 13 begins to appear. The apostle Paul says, "But I am thankful to God for you beloved brothers, because God has chosen you as the first fruits to salvation. It's not true of you, church of Thessalonica. There's something rich in store for you." The apostle Paul builds the confidences in the first place of the people of Thessalonica by highlighting God's choice of them, of God's choice of them. Now when we consider God's choice, that God has plucked these men and women, this church at Thessalonica, this rag-tag bunch of new disciples there in Thessalonica, these are the ones that He's chosen, the apostle Paul sees this as stabilizing to their faith. He sees this as bringing calm.

I. Love.

Now how does the choice of God bring security and stability to our faith? Now here is the question I think the apostle Paul would want us to ask tonight. The first way that God's choice brings stability to our faith is that God's choice expresses His love for us. He expresses His love for us. When you choose someone to be your friend, when you choose to date someone, or choose to marry someone, you're saying something with your choice. You're communicating something. You're communicating that, "I want to be with you. I want a relationship with you. I want to be united to you. I want you and I to be friends. I want you and I to be connected." That's what you're communicating. You're expressing a sense of care and a sense of love for that other person. The apostle Paul, when he says, "I know God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, that in that choice He's expressing to you an eternal and immovable love. He says, "I know that your understanding, church of Thessalonica, of that love is faltering. I know that you're shaken and you're alarmed, but God's not shaken. He's not alarmed. And He's chosen you.

It's remarkable when you span the scope of the Scripture's teaching upon this doctrine of election, a doctrine that often causes us tremendous fits and turmoil, is a doctrine that's almost always placed within the context of giving security and comfort to the believer. Why is that? Aren't you glad that your faith isn't dependent upon your choice? Why should you be glad of that? Because your choice could undergo the same trouble that the church at Thessalonica is facing — you could begin to doubt; you could falter; you could experience the earth, spiritually speaking, shaking underneath your feet, and you may not know your

way out of a paper bag spiritually. Haven't you been there before, when you begin in your own mind to question whether any of this is true? The beauty of God's choice in that moment is that your salvation is not based on your solid embrace, but it's based on God's embrace of you in His love.

II. Commitment.

The other thing God's choice communicates to us in addition to His love, is it communicates His commitment to us. You think about this when you make a choice. When you make a choice, you are saying, "I am committed to this person or to this direction or to do this thing," right? If you are at an intersection, it's a dead end and you can only take a left or a right, you're going to have to make a choice. And what that means, is that if you make that choice to turn left, you will not turn right. And if you make the decision to turn right, you will not be turning left. Now what does this mean? It means that you've committed to a direction.

You know, one of the biggest decisions that we often face, isn't it, when we end up at a restaurant somewhere, one that we love, and there's two of our favorite things on the menu. Oh what do to, what to do! In that moment I always think, "Well I could order both and then just eat half and take the other half home and save it for a second meal." Anything to have to choose between one or the other! But you know that the minute you've given your order to the waitress or to the waiter, you've made a decision, and when you've made that decision it was a commitment, and in that commitment you've said "yes" to something and you've said "no" to everything else.

When God chooses us He says "yes" to us. He says "yes" to us. He's committed to us. He's focused on us. He's got us in His fists and He's not letting us go. He's made a commitment to us. He has vowed to us. He extends promises to us in His choice. The apostle Paul says, "This is stabilizing to your faith, church of Thessalonica."

III. Character.

But lastly, choice actually reveals more than just love, more than just commitment, it also reveals character. You know love, or at least the expression of love, in the expression of commitment, are only as good as the person they come from. They're only as good as the person they come from. How do you know you can trust God's choice? How do you know you can trust God's commitment? Well you have to know His character. You have to know who He is. Now when we begin to look at it on a human plane, this causes us a great amount of angst, doesn't it, because you and I change our minds all the time. We make a decision to buy a house. We buy the house. We're in it. We're in it for a week. It's the best house that anyone could ever imagine. It will meet our needs

to the fullest. We are completely content in it. Two years go by, three, and you begin racking up a little list in the back of your mind about all the ways that this house could be better, all the ways that it didn't quite meet the needs and the expectations that you had on the front end of things, and you begin to thumb through the paper for other perfect houses. You change your mind. We're pretty fickle people.

I've heard that the average in college these days for changing your major is at least three times. I was at Jackson State University Thursday night for the RUF service. I had a wonderful conversation with one of the students there who confessed to me that he had been there "five long years." He said it just like that. I said, "Why have you been here five long years?" "Well I changed my major four times." "Right." We're fickle aren't we? Constantly in a fit about what is the right direction in which to go.

The other problem about us in terms of our choices is the fact that we are sinful. We are sinful. We sometimes commit to something and because of our sin, we don't follow through with it. We make a choice, we come up with a plan, we chart a direction, we turn over a new leaf, and it lasts a good solid week. Because the weakness of our flesh and the sinfulness that often surrounds us, the fallenness of which we are in, we're not able to see a thing through to the end. Sometimes it's just because we're liars and we're cheats. We say we're going to do something but we have no intention to do so because of the hardness of our heart.

Another reason we often almost fail is because we're finite. I don't know if you've checked lately, but there's a high likelihood that you do not have an infinite control over your life, or an infinite measure of resources to make sure no calamity comes into your life. This has become very real to me. This past week when the plumber came to our house again, he said something about thousands of dollars — that's all I remember. I sort of blanked out at that point. I don't have an infinite number of resources. I can't control everything that goes into my life. I would tell you, it was not a good time for me to have plumbing problems. I can't actually think of a good time. But one thing I know is that we don't have infinite resources. We can't control — we'll make a commitment or a decision and then because of providence, because of something outside the scope of our control, we will not be able to follow through with the decision or the commitment we've made. We're in bad shape. We're fickle, we're sinful, and we're finite. So much for our decisions.

Paul wants the church of Thessalonica to know that this is not the way God works. In Numbers 23:19, "God is not like a son of man that He should change His mind." He sets His heart on a choice or a decision and there is no movement to the left or to the right. He accomplishes His goal. Psalm 5, verse 4, "You are not a God who delights in wickedness. Evil does not dwell in You." There's no sinfulness in our God. There is no sin nature that drags Him down to keep Him

from accomplishing His plan. Psalm 115:3, "God is in heaven. He does whatever He pleases." Infinite resources, infinite knowledge, with infinite power - that God chose you for His people that He would treasure for His possession. Do you see the stability? Do you feel the stability? "No one," John 10 tells us, "can pluck one of the redeemed out of God's hand."

The apostle Paul says, "You have confidence, church of Thessalonica. You don't have to worry about the man of lawlessness and the apostasy. He has chosen you. I've seen the fruit of it. You don't have to worry about the Day of the Lord, though it will be a testing by fire, the Lord Jesus Christ is your merit. He is your standing before me."

Now you would think that with such tremendous confidences as this, that we could just sit back and relax, just kind of rest back on our laurels — get a little "R and R" time. That's not the way the apostle Paul sees it. Notice the transition he makes into verse 14 — "To this," he says, "He called you through the Gospel." There's a calling in this. There's a calling according to the apostle Paul. There's not just a comfort in God's choice, but there's a calling that arises out of God's choice. Now what is, exactly, verse 14 referring to when it says, "to this — to this He called you through the Gospel." Well it seems quite clear that he's talking about salvation, that this salvation that He's granted to you is a salvation that includes or comes with a calling. So this means that you've got to know something about this salvation to know how it is that you ought to live, to know what it is that you're called to. He says here, first of all, "that this salvation I'm speaking of is not a present salvation, but a future salvation." Notice how he describes it — verse 14 — "to this He called you through the gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ," a reference to our salvation. When do you get the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you have it now? No, you'll have it then. You'll have it at the point at which you behold the face of Christ for you will be like Him, for you will see Him as He is. He's talking about that great Day of Judgment again.

Now those scholars of the Scripture in here know that the Scripture oftentimes refers to salvation in the future. It will talk about it in the past, it will talk about it in the present, but in this instance, it's talking about it in the future. We often use the term "glorification" for this, "glorification" for this. Paul is saying, "He has chosen you for glorification. This is His plan for you and this plan includes this call." How do we walk in this salvation? Let's look at what he says at the end of verse 13. "We are saved" — how are we saved? "Through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." Now we're not used to hearing those words, "saved through sanctification." We're used to hearing "saved by faith, saved by Christ." Here he says, "saved through sanctification." Now sanctification of course is the process by which we are made holy, or the process that we are made like God. What is Paul saying? How are we saved through sanctification? This is how we're saved through sanctification — if the salvation being referred to is future, is glory, that the life we now live presently in this world is a life that is given over to the pursuit

of the holiness that we will be in the heavenly places that God has chosen for us, that the path of salvation, passing through the gate at conversion, the path of salvation is sanctification unto the glorification that God has chosen for us. You should have ringing in the back of your mind Romans 8 again, that “God has predestined us, chosen us, even for glorification.”

Well how do we do the sanctification thing? He says two things — “by the Spirit and belief in the truth; by the spirit and belief in the truth.” Now Paul is not saying, “There's two tracks my friends. You can take the Spirit track or you can take the truth track. Which one would you like? Either one will get you there.” No, that's not what the apostle Paul is saying. These are more like two ingredients that are combined in your soul to bring about your growth in holiness unto glorification. It's the work of the Spirit, in relationship to the truth, in relationship to the truth. That's how the Spirit works, doesn't He? We pray before we preach God's Word, we pray in the invocation before we worship together, “Oh Spirit come and enlighten our minds and our hearts.” Don't we say that so often, that we want the Spirit to come and reveal to us spiritually what it is that we need to know? We did that tonight. When we do that, we are asking for the Spirit to open up our eyes and hearts to the truth so that we can embrace it. And when we embrace it, the Spirit grows us up in that same embrace of the faith that He's given us.

So Paul here is setting forth, for you, a clarion call and a pattern, for those of you who are instable, those of you who are shaken, those of you who are doubting in the faith, he says, “The sanctification comes by the Spirit and belief in the truth as these two things come together. We pursue them both.” Paul says, “Church of Thessalonica, see this, believe it, and stand firm, stand firm.” One of the most difficult things that we do in the faith is to stay still, is to stay still. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that when instability and insecurity begin to seep into our spiritual lives, we're “like children who are tossed to and fro by every wind and wave of doctrine.” That's what he says. One of the most difficult things we do is stay still, hold on to, stand firm, lay hold of and never let go, the initial, foundational, essential things related to the Gospel. The apostle Paul is calling the church of Thessalonica back there and he's calling you there too.

Dr. Al Mohler had a tremendous convocation on this passage quite a few years ago. The title of it was, *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There*. That was the name of the title. Later he gave a talk just as stimulating, just as fascinating as, *Don't Just Stand There, Do Something*. There's a very real sense that those two phrases capture the tension of this passage, that there are places in which we stand and never move and that in our standing we will find the Spirit draw us ever closer, ever onward, to the face of our beloved Savior, purifying us from sin and ungodliness, and helping us to be whole — the holiness that we were fit for.

Are you tossed tonight? Has the world deceived you? Have you misunderstood the truths of God's Word to the degree at which you feel not its comfort or its stability? The apostle Paul says gaze, gaze into this salvation, this choosing, this

call, that God has granted to you, and you will find a foot on a Rock that naught can move.

Father in heaven, there is so much that would wage war against a foundation of the Gospel in our hearts. There are many men of lawlessness that would seek to deceive Your church, and there is a waywardness in our minds to comprehend spiritually Your call and Your message that would jeopardize our stability upon the Rock of Christ. Father we praise You for being faithful to Your people and to this church for so many years, but Lord, we are not naive to believe that it could not happen to us tomorrow. So Father, in humility, would You grant to us the spiritual comprehension and experience of the immovable Rock of the Gospel in Christ that we might stand still until the day when we stand in Your presence? We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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