

Paul's Affirmation and Appeal

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[0 : 0 0] to 17. 13 to 17 where Paul sets out these wonderful truths for the Thessalonians. As much as anyone who ever lived, Paul realized the need for God's people to be encouraged, for them to be assured, for them to be reassured, for them to come to know comfort. And he does all that by teaching the gospel, by teaching from what God had given him to teach. And you'll find that within this short passage as well. And in summary, you could say what he's really saying to the Thessalonians, and this is still a very young church, remember, one of the earliest churches established. And what he's basically saying to them is, be confident in your God and in his salvation, salvation. Because he refers to God, indeed he refers to the Trinity, the Father, Lord Jesus

Christ, the Spirit. And around that he fits in these great aspects of salvation. So he's really saying to these Thessalonians, and it's especially after the first part of this chapter, right down to verse 12, which contains, as you know, very dark things, things to do with the judgment of God, things to do with the future in terms of what is there before Christ comes, God destroying the man of sin, the man of lawlessness, those who are perishing, the emphasis on those, God sending some a strong delusion that they might believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but at pleasure in unrighteousness.

And as you go through the darkness of those verses, a very necessary teaching, of course, as Paul well knew, then it's such a great relief to come to this wonderful shaft of light in verses 13 to 17, where he sets out this appeal to be confident in the Lord and in his salvation.

Why need they be confident? How can they be confident? What is it that gives the confidence that he's calling for and appealing to in these verses? Well, three things really about God or related to God that we can summarize just in three short headings. First of all, he talks here about God's choice, and then secondly about God's call, and thirdly about God's comfort. God's choice, God's call, and God's comfort. But he says we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved. And it's interesting and important that he's saying this as a contrast to those that he's just mentioned towards the end of the previous passage. He's really assuring these Thessalonians that although he said that about others and about people who will be condemned, this is not what he's saying about them. We ought always to give thanks to you because God chose you. And he's setting their confidence in God's own being and in God's action towards them. So what is it he's saying about God?

Well, he's talking about God's choice, first of all, and leading us to have our confidence in God's choice. When things come to make difficult providences for us and the wisdom of God, like the apostle, we want to turn our minds to those great truths that God has given us in the gospel. And he talks here about God's own choice. God has chosen you. This is the reason he's giving thanks to God that the gospel was productive in the Thessalonians, and he now sees in them and knows them to be a people who have accepted Christ and salvation. And so he's giving thanks for that. But you see, he's talking about God's choice as the God chose you as the first fruit. And that's a possible translation. Yes, he has gone for that translation. And the older translations and some other more modern translations actually have God chose you in the beginning or from the beginning. And that's probably a better translation than what the ESV has gone from here, chosen from the beginning. In other words, Paul is really saying your confidence here is in this great fact, or this is the first great fact that God chose you. It was always the case. There was never a time, never a moment when you were not chosen by God, when God had not set his love and his mind and his attention upon you. You were from the beginning. God chose you. What a great comforting truth that is as we come to realize that God has set his love upon us as his people before we existed, before the world existed, before God had created anything. His mind was on his people. His mind was on their salvation.

[5 : 11] His mind was on doing them good. His mind was upon them in love. His mind was upon them with the intent of bringing them ultimately, as we'll see, to obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Surely there's nothing more remarkable for ourselves and nothing more worthy of our praise to God than the fact that he chose us in love before the world existed.

He didn't choose us because we were attractive. He didn't choose us prior to our fall and just look upon us in Adam before we actually fell in Adam. He chose us as sinners. He chose us as people needy of salvation. He chose us as people who would come to know Christ as our Savior and so be saved through him.

I came across a story, an account the other day, of a woman from America, Joyce Doherty, who adopted a two-year-old girl from the Ukraine. This was around 2003-2004.

And there was quite a lot of adoption then from Eastern Europe, especially from the likes of Ukraine. And it was the practice, sadly, the likes of Ukraine and other places there, that children who were born with disabilities, children who were born with serious deficiencies, were taken to an orphanage and just left there. And the parents just left them there. That was it. And very often the orphanages there, certainly at that time, weren't really able to cope with poverty around them and so on, weren't able to cope with looking after them properly. So she went to visit this orphanage in Ukraine.

[7 : 00] And as she was taken through to see the children there, she set her eyes upon this little two-year-old. And she had wonderful bright eyes, but she also had a large tumor on her face.

But she decided this was the girl that she'd want to take back to America and adopt, become part of her family. And shortly after that, a surgeon removed the tumor successfully and the scars healed.

And that's really how it is with us as well. This little girl came constantly after that, it seems to refer to this lady as her mother. She didn't know anything other than that anyway, but she would also often say, I do love you, mommy. I really love you, mother. And she would just repeat this.

That's how God has dealt with us. He saw us in our ugliness, in our sin, in everything that we had brought upon ourselves in all the defects and the deficiencies of our sin, in our guilt, in our pollution.

He set his love upon us. And he set his love upon us to rescue us, to bring us out from that and make us beautiful and make us ultimately like himself. And what he's saying here is, this is what's giving you assurance, brothers, in Thessalonica, that God chose you from the beginning and he chose you to be saved.

[8 : 30] This was his purpose in choosing us. This was his purpose in setting his love upon his people. It was with a view to their salvation. God's love toward his people has a very, very specific purpose.

And that purpose is that they come to be saved, that they will come to be rescued from their sin and brought into salvation. And of course, you find that great passage in Ephesians chapter 1 from verse 3 onwards, emphasizing that, chose us before the foundation of the world. And all the way from there down through the following verses, what you really have is the effect of, or the things that follow on from God's loving choice, from God's loving election of his people. Everything else that he mentions in that huge, long sentence was so many things packed into it in Ephesians 1.

But they all go back to the source. And the source is God's love, God's saving love. And here he's talking about God's sanctifying love as well. It comes, he chose you from the beginning to be saved, but how? Through sanctification of the Spirit or by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

See, he's building up these wonderful layers of truth for their assurance, for their reassurance, for their confidence in God, in the gospel, whatever surrounds them, of paganism as it is, of opposition as it was then. He's throwing their minds always back to this. That's what you and I need to do as well. That's really our duty in the gospel towards God's people. That's what we're seeking to do very imperfectly, I know, but is to bring us back to these wonderful basic things of our salvation, because that's where our confidence is anchored. That's where we get our comfort from.

So he's talking about sanctification. And of course, as you know, that means there's two sides to that. There's the fact of God setting us apart for himself. That's something that is to do with sanctification.

[10 : 40] But the other one is God's Spirit. He talks here about the Spirit, sanctification by the Spirit, which you'll know is the work of God's Spirit within God's people, making them holy, bringing them away from sin, bringing them away from the service of sin, bringing them more and more as life goes on into following the Lord, into loving the Lord, into serving the Lord. We do that very imperfectly, of course, as well.

But we're assured that where he has begun this good work in us, he'll bring it to completion. And the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is constantly active in that. Interestingly, in 1 Peter, you'll find a very similar way of Peter beginning his epistle. You know, and that itself shows you that these apostles, as they were inspired by God, of course, but nevertheless, this was their own way of dealing with the churches they were writing to, always emphasizing these basic things for them.

He's saying, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect, exiles of the dispersion, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, that's the Father's love, and then through sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Christ and the sprinkling of his blood. That's what the end in view is.

God's choice leads to that. So it's through sanctification of the Spirit. But then you'll notice, and belief in the truth. And belief in the truth, or belief of the truth.

That is such an important addition to sanctification by the Spirit. Because Paul will have nothing of the Spirit doing everything, and ourselves thinking we're entirely passive.

[12 : 32] We are saved through the Spirit's work. That's what brings us alive. But the result of that is our belief in the truth.

Belief in God's truth in Christ. Belief in the gospel. Belief in the truth as it is in Jesus, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, verse 21. That's what the Spirit uses.

The truth of God. The gospel of God. So there's God's choice. It's chosen to be saved. It's chosen to be saved through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth.

And tonight, that's where our confidence has to lie. It's not in the worthiness of our own decision, our own acceptance of Christ, not in anything to do with our success, or otherwise against sin, or our failure against sin, our lapses, all of these things that come into our daily experience.

You go for your confidence, as you have to go for your confidence every day, to the root of the matter, to God's love, to God the Father, loving us from all eternity, and loving us for salvation, and loving us for salvation through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief in the truth.

[13 : 54] And then secondly, following on from that, Paul goes to speak about the call of God, God's call. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God called those upon whom he set his love from all eternity. And this call, as you know from the Catechism, is effectively a spiritual summons, where the gospel comes and draws us to God by his blessing, where God, by his Spirit, sanctification of the Spirit, but also the call of God through the Spirit of God, what is it that happens?

Well, as the Catechism puts it, Catechism 31, he persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ as he's offered in the gospel.

So you come to take your decision for Christ, not of your own creation. It is your own choice. It is your own decision, in the sense that it is we personally who embrace Christ and put our trust and faith in him.

But it's created by the Spirit of God it's through the calling of the Spirit, the calling of God through the Spirit, so that it's through the gospel that he called us.

[15 : 17] He's called us, he's saying here, through our gospel. Now, why is he saying through our gospel? Well, first of all, it's to do with the gospel that Paul himself was concerned to promote.

He's calling it our gospel, not because it belongs ultimately to him personally, or just to these apostles of whom he was one. Our gospel here means the gospel he preached, not any other version of it, not any other species of teaching or of truth.

In crisis times, such as these Thessalonians were facing, in crisis times, such as we ourselves face from time to time. We must never think that the answer to the crisis is changing the message of the gospel.

That has to do with somehow adjusting matters to fit in with what the people of our generation might think best, or might want to see as the kind of teaching that human beings ought to have.

Paul is saying it's through our gospel, through what God gave us to proclaim, to teach. And he is anchoring the confidence of the Thessalonians in that.

[16 : 38] And tonight, friends, that's what we have to continue to believe, even through this lockdown time. And it's so encouraging to see others coming to join meetings that were not in the practice of even coming to church, perhaps.

And that's a wonderful thing to see. And I think that we follow on in prayer in regard. But it's something that you want not just to continue, but also that you will find that this gospel is absolutely sufficient and relevant for such times as these, as well as times when there is more freedom to meet together.

And let's always remember it is the gospel that Paul preached that we still have to maintain and preach today. Whatever defects or defections we find from that, whatever kind of departures we find from the gospel itself.

And there are many in this world. Nevertheless, this is what our confidence rests upon. So he's talking there about God's call, this effectual summons that has brought us to connect with Christ.

And he's called us here to obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not only is he saying he's called you through our gospel, but there's a purpose too in that.

[18 : 05] You see, the whole thing just follows on so wonderfully, point after point. So that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's the wonderful prospect that God's people must keep in view.

That they have been called, they've been loved by God, and then through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth, they've been called by God through the gospel.

And the whole purpose of that is so that they will ultimately obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has called us to glory. He has called us to the glory that Jesus died for.

There's so many things that come into mind when you even say that. When you think of the glory of heaven, the glory of the final order of things, and realize something of what it must be like just from what you understand from the Bible's own teaching, and I know that's not taking us very far in our understanding of it, but nevertheless, it is the glory, not just the glory that Jesus obtained, that Jesus purchased by his blood, it's the glory that Jesus deserved and deserves.

Jesus deserves nothing less than that we who trust in him be given the glory he died to obtain. In other words, you can also add to that and say, well, I know that the glory of heaven, the glory that will be mine there, the glory that Jesus purchased for me, I know it will be absolutely to the maximum that I can possibly, possibly accommodate in my glorified life, because that's what Jesus deserves.

[19 : 53] That is what Jesus died to obtain. And not only that, but it's also in the sense of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the glory of his likeness. God sanctifies, God calls, God loves us in order that we may obtain the glory that Romans 8 describes as the likeness of his Son, that we may be conformed to that image, the likeness of his Son.

from the dunghill of our sin, of our lostness, through sanctification of the Spirit, and through the calling of God by the gospel, with the ultimate aim of being perfectly like Jesus, being perfectly like the Son of God, in glory, in his image.

Now, isn't that comforting? Doesn't that reassure you? And doesn't it reassure you especially, and fill you with comfort, when you realize that this is not dependent on your own ability, not dependent on any merit that you might think you have or I have, because we don't have it anyway.

It's not dependent on anything other than the work of God, what's already happened, what's happening now, and what will happen yet at Christ's coming.

And see the conclusion he's drawing from that. So then, brothers, in other words, these two great points of God's choice and God's call, so much is that really the ground of our confidence and assurance and affirmation.

[21 : 46] He's now drawing the conclusion, so then, because this is the case, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you are taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

So the soul then, is really, the point he's coming to by the way of a concluding comment and appeal. And when he talks here about traditions, we mustn't get the wrong idea from that.

It's not traditions in the sense sometimes that you think about it, things that people have decided to actually take up and then they become traditions down through the years. No, Paul means by traditions, he actually means the body of teaching that he was given by God to pass on to the church.

The apostolic truth that we have now in our New Testaments. So that's the tradition that he received from God and the other apostles. This great body of teaching, this great body of truth, this foundational truth.

And he's saying, stand firm and hold on to that. You see, he's asking them and appealing to them, whatever you see going on around you, whatever temptations you may come to meet with, to depart from this, to change this, to alter this, stand firm.

[23 : 09] Don't give in to that. And hold on to this. Those that you were taught by us, the apostles. So that's his concluding appeal from that.

So there's God's choice and God's call to which Paul attaches this conclusion, this appeal. But then he moves just finally to God's comfort.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God, our Father, who loved us, he's going back to that again, and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace.

May he comfort your hearts, may they comfort your hearts and establish them in every good word and work. That's what he's been working towards. That's why he's gone over all of this great doctrine, all of this great teaching, all of this wonderful foundational truth, because he's applying it in the most practical terms.

And of course, that's a lesson again to ourselves. I know we've said this so often, but it's so important to come back to it. Every great doctrine in the Bible, whether it's to do with the being of God, with the work of God, with God the Father, with God the Son, with God the Spirit, with the Trinity, with whatever, it is all designed for the benefit of God's people, for their establishing in the truth, for their advancement, for their perseverance, for their comfort, for their assurance, indeed sometimes for their rebuke.

[24 : 45] But that's what it's about. The greatest doctrines fit in with our practical needs. And that's what we always keep together. Now what he's saying here is, may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, that wonderful personal emphasis, that the Lord Jesus himself is going to go with us into what's remaining of our lives and what needs yet to be done.

But he's not leaving it at that. And God our Father, may the two of them, he says, sanctify you, comfort your hearts, and establish you in every good word and work, work, work, and word.

That's his wonderful, magnificent conclusion, that he's really seeking God will actually himself finish and come to bring to completion what is already begun.

And may he now, he says, comfort you, comfort you and establish your hearts in every good word, work, work, work, and word. Spurgeon, we usually refer to C.H. Spurgeon just as Spurgeon.

And in 1851, Spurgeon began his ministry in the parish of Water Beach, which was just about nine miles or so north of Cambridge.

[26 : 14] He lived in Cambridge and he went to Water Beach, he traveled to Water Beach to begin his ministry there. staggeringly, he was just 17 years old.

I tremble at the thought of me at 17, even today, at 66 years old, never mind 17 years old, actually going out and taking on a pastoral charge.

But of course, Spurgeon was in many ways endowed beyond the most. And that's where he began in Water Beach at 17. And one day he went to visit one of those men in his parish in his congregation who lived out in the countryside.

And when he looked up, the man had on top of his barn a weathervane. And all the weathervane was a reference to God's love. And when Spurgeon looked, a very young man of 17, looked up and he said to the man, well, he said, I'm not sure, he says, that that's very appropriate because that gives the impression, he said, that God just changes the way the wind changes direction.

That's how it is with God as well. Oh, no, he says, Pastor. Oh, no, he says, that's not what it's about. What it means is this, whichever way the wind changes, God's love does not.

[27 : 40] Whatever way the wind changes, God's love does not. It remains God's unchangeable love. God's choice, God's call, and God's comfort for our hearts.

And when he brings us this assurance, this reassurance, this comfort, it's so that we will apply it also practically in the way Paul taught the Thessalonians to establish us in every good work and word.

But every good work and word outwardly begins with the heart inwardly. May God bless these thoughts to us this evening.

Now we're going to conclude by singing again. We're singing from Psalm 100. the card confirm