

Confident in God's Saving Work

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

A few years ago my family and I did some indoor rock climbing together.

I've been a few times in my life and when we went there was what I considered to be a significant change.

When I went in my teen years you had to be in groups of two to climb.

One person would climb and the other person would be responsible to hold the rope that was attached to the safety harness of the climber.

In order for that to work well you needed to learn how to tie the appropriate knot, you needed to have the proper technique for holding the rope, and you needed your partner to be about the same weight as you.

You also needed your partner to pay attention and take up all the slack in the rope as you climbed.

If you completed the climb or fell the person holding the rope would keep you safe and let you down gently to the ground.

When we went as a family I was expecting the same sort of setup, but it was different.

At the place we went to there was no need for a partner because they had a device that would hold the rope automatically.

Now if I had been smart I would have climbed a few feet and tested the device to see how it felt, but instead I climbed all the way to the top of the wall.

With a person is holding the rope you feel them holding you the whole time so as soon as you start to let yourself down you instantly know they are holding you.

With the machine it takes a split second for the braking to engage so when I started to let myself down it felt like I was going to fall.

I instantly pulled myself back up and found myself unwilling to let go.

I was also too tired to climb back down safely and was left with a choice to either trust the machine or ask to be rescued.

Looking around the room I saw the other machines working as they should and I could not bear the thought of having to be rescued so I forced myself to let go.

In less than a second the machine engaged and I descended safely to the floor.

After a few more climbs I adjusted to the feeling and was fine for the rest of the day, but that first moment was scary.

[I think that is a pretty good picture of what the Christian life can feel like at times. We face things on occasion that make us wonder whether or not we can trust the gospel. Thankfully the

LORD knows our weakness and gives us a great deal of encouragement in His Word. Our text this morning **2 Thessalonians 2:13-17** is an example of that. In the second half of chapter one and in the first part of chapter two the Apostle Paul has been teaching these believers about God's judgement on unbelievers, the trials that we can expect in the last days before Jesus' return, and the deception of the antichrist that will lead people into destruction. Now in these verses Paul reminds them and us of why we can trust in God's saving work through all of that. The first thing he reminds us about our being rescued from destruction is that...]

Point #1 – Salvation depends on God's work. (Verses 13-14)

From beginning to end believers are delivered from the consequences of human rebellion against the LORD on account of what He has decided to do for us.

Once again in this letter the apostle turns to give thanks to the LORD for these believers. (Verse 1a stop at 'LORD').

Based on the way Paul uses the word LORD in these letters he is certainly referring to Jesus here.

Loved here is in the past tense which raises the question, 'When did Jesus start loving His people?'

Our memory verse for the month tells us that His love for us compelled Him to die for us "while we were still sinners."

If you are in Christ today Jesus loved you when you were unlovable, amazing!

How far back does that go? Into all eternity past! Think about that. If Jesus has loved you in all eternity past will He not also love you in all eternity future? That is incredible to think about!

We see the outworking of that affection in the rest of verse 13-14.

Some translations say 'God has chosen you from the beginning' instead of 'first fruits'.

If from the beginning is correct it may refer to having made a choice from before the beginning of creation and it may refer to the time Paul first preached the gospel to these believers.

If 'first fruits' is right then it means that God chose to save these believers first and that they would be followed by many more coming to Christ.

Here is the thing, every one of those possibilities is biblically true.

Regardless of the moment in time being discussed here, Paul is clearly saying that God makes a choice to bring people to Himself that they might be saved.

That happens he says 'through sanctification by the Spirit'.

The heart of the word 'sanctification' means to be set apart to belong to God.

Another way we might describe it is to be made holy.

It is the work of the Spirit upon the one beloved by the LORD and chosen by God that enables 'belief in the truth'.

You know you are loved by Jesus and chosen by God when you come to believe you are a sinner who needs a Saviour. When you know and believe that Jesus died for you to make you right with God and that He rose from the dead to give you eternal life.

When you start loving God's Word and seek to live according to its commands.

This is what God 'calls' people to 'through the gospel'.

When Paul was preaching to these people God was calling them to Himself through that proclamation.

Paul was doing the preaching, but it is God doing the calling and He does it so that His people will 'obtain the glory of Jesus'.

Christ in His humanity has conquered the grave and has been exalted to the highest place to the glory of God and those that belong to Him by faith will enjoy His glory forever.

All of this is God's work in salvation, in fact all of salvation depends completely on God's work.

[I'm a big fan of first responders like police, fire, ambulance etc. They show up to places and situations where they are literally the only hope someone has of being rescued. A person trapped in a car is surely happy to see the fire department show up with the Jaws of Life because they know their hope depends on the work of the fire fighters to cut them out of the car.]

That is the picture the bible paints for us in terms of salvation.

In fact, the gospel is the only message that proclaims this truth.

Every other religion in the world is about what people have to do in order to make their so called god happy.

Every other religion in the world depends on human effort.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is all about what God has done for us.

It depends completely upon Him from before time began and into all eternity future.

[I know full well that is a hard truth to wrap our minds around. I would go so far as to say that it is impossible for our finite minds to fully grasp such a wondrous mystery. That is unsurprising when we are talking about an eternal, infinite, all knowing, all powerful, unchangeable, and present everywhere being and that is just for starters when we are considering the nature of God. So why tell us this? Because it forms the basis for the command that is given to us in the next verse. The command that is given shows us that...]

Point #2 – God's work is a firm foundation upon which to stand. (Verse 15)

Because salvation depends on the LORD we have every reason we need to hold on to the gospel of Christ.

Verse 15 begins with the word ‘So then, brothers’.

Because God chose you, sanctified you, and called you to be saved, he says this in **verse 15**.

Again Paul calls these believers ‘brothers’ reminding us that he rightly sees himself as being an object of God’s saving work and it reminds us of his deep affection for these fellow believers.

He is writing these things out of love desiring what is best for these brothers and sisters who are facing trial in persecution as well as false teaching that is intended to shake their hope in the coming of Jesus.

That is why he reminds them and us that the work of salvation is God’s work, because if our salvation depends on God it cannot be shaken.

That is a wonderful truth that can be easily twisted in the wrong direction.

Many in the history of the church have done just that.

They take the truth that our salvation depends on the work of God and use it to minimize or even eliminate human responsibility.

They take God’s act of choosing as a reason to be passive.

If it is all up to God then we can just sit back and do nothing.

That is as far away as you can possibly get from what the Bible actually teaches.

Is the command here, “God has chosen you so sit back and relax?”

Far from it. Instead it is, “God has chosen you, sanctified you, and called you...*So then stand firm.*”

God work is a call to action brothers and sisters.

In the face of the spiritual war that is raging on in this present age you stand your ground because your God is in control.

The second command is similar, it is “hold to the traditions that you were taught by us.”

We need to be very careful here with the word ‘traditions’.

Leon Morris very helpfully points out that the word is being used to point to ‘...an authority external to the teacher himself.’

These are NOT the mere traditions of men but teaching based on the full authority of Christ Himself through the power of the Holy Spirit according to the will of God the Father.

This came to the church in two forms, the spoken word and the written word.

Since all of the apostles have all gone to be with Christ in glory we are left with the written word.

Every essential gospel truth spoken by the apostles is now included in the written word that God has graciously and powerfully preserved for us down through the ages.

We have everything we need in the Bible and knowing our salvation depends of God's power and work gives us every reason to stand firm in this truth.

[Think of it like throwing an anchor into the water to keep a boat in the same place. Did you know there are different types and sizes of anchors depending on the size of boat and situation? When the anchor is in the water you don't see it, but if you know what size and type of anchor is down there you know whether or not you can trust it.]

Do we know what kind of anchor we have in Christ?

The affection of Jesus from all eternity past which compelled Him to enter into the world to offer His glorious perfection for us?

The Father Who sends the Son whom He loves through all eternity with infinite perfection, how then will He not also give to those in Christ 'all things' Paul asks in Romans 8:32.

It is unthinkable that God would send Christ for you and fail you.

The Spirit who makes us alive though we were dead in our sins will indeed continue His good work to completion.

That is the anchor of our faith brothers and sisters, so stand firm and hold on to the truth of God's word.

[I love what Matthew Henry says on this verse, he says, "God's grace in our election and vocation (gospel obedience) is so far from superseding our diligent care and endeavor that it should quicken and engage us to the greatest resolution and diligence." Instead of making of passive or fatalistic, God's work, power, and knowledge should fuel our resolve to live for Him to the maximum possible degree. If that is going to be true, then we need something more than facts in our heads which is why the apostle turns to prayer in verses 16-17 and what he prays show us this third lesson about God's saving work, that...]

Point #3 – Believers need God's work in their hearts. (Verses 16-17)

Being confident in the salvation of the LORD requires more than information in our heads it requires real trust and delight in the core of our being.

Let us first of all notice who this prayer or petition is made to at the beginning of verse 16.

Calling Jesus Lord is very common in the New Testament.

There is a good bit to consider in that word. It is a clear attack on the Roman idea of the emperor being LORD.

No human authority no matter how great has the final say over you that belongs to Christ.

This is also the word that translates God's proper name in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

It is clear that Paul intends to ascribe equality with God the Father to Jesus here simply by the fact that Jesus is mentioned first and that both the Father and the Son are being addressed in this prayer.

There is not one prayer in the whole of the Bible that is considered right and good that is addressed to someone other than God Himself.

The fact that Paul, a man who thoroughly knew his bible and knew the seriousness of idolatry, addresses a prayer to Jesus clearly shows the Divine nature of Christ.

His prayer is also mindful of what God the Father has done for His people.

Just as Jesus has set His affection upon believers, so too has the Father.

Out of that affection He 'gave us' past tense 'eternal comfort'.

Because of what God has accomplished in His Son there has never been and there shall never be a time when we are without a reason to be comforted.

And closely connected to that is the 'good hope' that the Father gives us 'through grace'.

Our hope is good or certain because Jesus died and rose again and the fact that it is by grace, as Gene Green puts it, means "it can never be disappointed."

Jesus lived, died, and rose again to save you because God is gracious towards His people.

I can't tell you the number of times I have sat with people facing death who are asking the question, "Have I been good enough?"

There is only fear and hopelessness there because the answer is always no.

Our hope is in the goodness of Christ credited to our account solely based on the kindness of God.

That is a 'good hope' that is always true.

That is Who is being prayed to and here is what is being prayed for in **verse 17**.

He is praying that the God who 'loves us and gave us eternal comfort' will comfort the hearts of these believers.

Why is he praying for something God has already given us?

Because even though God has given us in the gospel every reason to be comforted we still need to feel it in our hearts.

What God has done in the past is impossible to change, but what can change is the way in which we experience it.

We struggle at times don't we? When things don't go our way it can be hard.

When our enemy raises doubts or when the world seems to be against us we can struggle to feel the comfort and hope of the gospel.

I know very well what it feels like to have a whole bunch of good theology in my mind and feel very little of it in my heart.

Paul knows this is a real struggle and so he pleads with God the Son and God the Father in this letter to ‘comfort’ the hearts of these believers.

We need that too.

This is something we should be regularly praying for one another!

That God would cause the comfort and hope of the gospel to be something we know and feel in the depth of our being.

In addition to that he prays that the hearts of these believers would be established ‘*in every good work and word.*’

If the grace of God is truly experienced in the heart, it gets worked out in the things we do and the things we say.

[Have you ever eaten something you didn’t like to be polite? Many years ago Michelle and I were at a wedding rehearsal dinner and they served shrimp. Personally not a big fan, but I ate it and tried my best to keep a straight face for the sake of being polite. I’m fairly certain I haven’t had any in the twenty years since. I ate it but it did not change my taste buds and therefore did not change my eating habits.]

Doctrine that is merely information may make it possible to sit in church or put a Jesus fish on our bumper, but it will make very little difference in our lives.

On the other hand when the love of Christ and God’s work of salvation is both known and felt in the depths of our hearts it changes our whole lives.

This is God’s work.

The eternal, all-knowing, unchanging, all-powerful Creator and sustainer of all things has done everything necessary to redeem us because He has loved those in Christ from before time began.

That is a sure and steady anchor, a firm foundation upon which we can stand immovably held by His saving grace.

If we truly believe that and feel that in our hearts, then everything changes for our good and His glory.

What an amazing thing to be confident in God’s saving work.

Let’s follow the example of this passage and pray together towards that end.