

February 21, 2010

# *Living in the Light of Christ's Return*

## *Waiting for the Son*

### *Part 2*

#### **1 Thessalonians 1:4 – 10**

We ended last week with Paul giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians **work of faith, labor of love** and **steadfastness of hope**, and then linking those things to the truth of **election**: *For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you.* 1 Thessalonians 1:4 Paul's thanksgiving to God is based on the fact that they were chosen of God – elect before the foundation of the world to be a people for God's own possession. He is thankful for their work of faith, they believed in Christ and were continuing in the faith. He is thankful for their love for Christ birth self-denying, other-centered labor. And he is thankful for their hope in God that was bearing the fruit of endurance. And he says that that is only possible if they truly were chosen by God.

Paul makes a strong statement here: **We know that God has chosen you.** Which begs the question – How does he know that? Or to make it more personal – **how can we know that we are chosen of God?** Paul says that very boldly: *For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you.* He doesn't say, 'We think there is a good chance that you might be chosen', or 'It's a good bet that you are saved'. Paul says categorically '**We know**'. This morning – never mind about the Thessalonians, or the person sitting next to you – how about you – do you know that you are chosen of God? How can you be sure?

Paul was sure about the Thessalonians because of six things: the gospel, the power of the Holy Spirit joyful endurance of affliction, a gospel-minded stance, the testimony of changed lives and an anticipation of Christ's return. 'We know you are chosen' Paul says, *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.* 1 Thessalonians 1:5 Paul was confident first of all that **the gospel was the power of God unto salvation**. That is, when he preached the gospel, God worked to save those whom He had chosen. When Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in Antioch, in chapter 13 of Acts, the Scripture records that *'And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.'* Acts 13:48

The gospel always works to accomplish the purpose of God in saving those whom He has chosen. We can be utterly confident that when the word of God goes out, it will have a saving effect on those whom God is calling to salvation. The gospel is not powerful and effective because we are such good preachers – it is powerful and effective because it is the power of God. That is why we should never be nervous or hesitant or shy about the gospel. We can be as bold as lions because all the power of heaven is behind it. **So firstly Paul knew they were chosen because they heard and responded to the gospel.**

**Secondly**, he knew because of the **evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit**. The result of his preaching was the gospel manifested *in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*. Conviction of sin, righteousness and the coming judgment is the work of the Holy Spirit and it isn't something you can fake. Either you are convicted of sin, convinced that you are not living righteously and certain that you are in danger of the wrath of God in judgment – or you are not. Signs and wonders are not the only evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible does not record any signs and wonders performed by Paul in Thessalonica as he preached the gospel. There may have been dramatic healings or cases of demons being cast out of people. We just don't know. But whatever the case, Paul said the gospel came to them in word and power and in the Holy Spirit. As evidence of power, consider this: According to Acts chapter 17, Paul spent a mere three weeks in Thessalonica, reasoning from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that Jesus was the Christ, and a vibrant, enduring church was born, and in spite of severe persecution, flourished. That is evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, Paul knew they were chosen of God because their lives bore witness to the saving power of the gospel in **joyful endurance of affliction**. *You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.* 1 Thessalonians 1:5b-7 For those who do not believe, those who are not chosen, affliction is something to run from, not to embrace, and certainly not something to regard with any measure of joy.

The word Paul uses here for affliction is the Greek word, **thlipsis**, and it means affliction, oppression, tribulation, pressure, and it is derived from a root word that means to crush or squeeze. God has designed that the path to glory be one that crushes or squeezes us – afflicts us. We see it in the life of Christ: *Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried ; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities ; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.* Isaiah 53:4-5 We see it in the life of Paul: *but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,* 2 Corinthians 6:4-5 So Paul tells the Thessalonians **'I know you are chosen by God because you became imitators of us and of the Lord, because you received the word in much affliction'**. In other words, **'Your lives bear witness of His life'**.

We need to understand that the path to glory runs through the valley of suffering. Jesus taught His disciples, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone ; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* John 12:24 Afflictions help us to do just that. And we need to understand that when affliction or pressure comes into our lives, it is not due to random happenstance, but by design. Listen to Paul's word to the Colossians: *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.* Colossians 1:24 What Paul was **not** saying here is that the sufferings of Christ were somehow deficient in worth and we need to add to them. But rather that his, Paul's, suffering, displayed and extended the sufficient sufferings of Christ to those they were meant to save. Josep Tson, a Rumanian pastor who has suffered much for the sake of the gospel said this: **'Christs sufferings were for propitiation – our sufferings are for propagation'**.

In other words, our afflictions are not only the result of being a Christian, but **the means through which others hear the good news of the gospel**. When Paul says that the sufferings of Christ are lacking – he does not mean they are lacking the power to save those whom God has chosen, but rather that what is lacking is the demonstration of the precious value of His sufferings to those who are lost. And that demonstration comes through us. **Evidence of the genuineness of our faith and the infinite worth of Christ, is found in the manner of our walking through suffering**. God designed that in our affliction and suffering, others would see the marks of the cross of Christ and know the love of Christ for them and be won to Christ.

**Fourthly**, Paul was convinced of their chosen status because of their **gospel-minded stance**: *For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,* 1 Thessalonians 1:8-9 One true mark of those who are chosen and saved is a passion to save the lost.

C.H. Spurgeon wrote: ***Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself. Be sure of that.... The saving of souls, if a man has once gained love to perishing sinners and his blessed Master, will be... an all-absorbing passion to him. It will so carry him away, that he will almost forget himself in the saving of others..... If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.*** C.H. Spurgeon

**Fifthly**, , Paul knew they were chosen because of the **testimony of changed lives**: **The strongest argument for the gospel of Jesus Christ is the personal testimony of someone whose life has been changed by it.** *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,* 1 Thessalonians 1:9 The impact of the gospel changed the course of the Thessalonians lives – from pagan idol-worshippers to living God worshipers. The evidence was immediate and powerful. People could see the difference. If there is no difference in the life of a man before conversion and after, that man has manifestly not been converted.

James Calvert (1813-1892) was a zealous missionary to cannibals on the Fiji Islands. His faithful work bore fruit in the lives of those accustomed to taking the life of others. Years later an English earl visited the Fiji Islands and was critical of a chief's conversion to Christianity. "You're a great leader but it's a pity you've been taken in by those foreign missionaries. No one believes the Bible anymore. People are tired of the threadbare story of Christ dying on a cross for the sins of mankind. They know better now. I'm sorry you've been so foolish as to accept their story. The old chief responded with a gleam in his eyes, "See that large rock over there? On it we smashed the heads of our victims. See the furnace next to it?"

In that oven we used to roast the bodies of our enemies. If it hadn't been for those good missionaries and the love of Jesus that changed us from cannibals into Christians, you'd never leave this place! You'd better thank the Lord for the gospel, otherwise we'd already be feasting on you. If it weren't for the Bible and its salvation message, you'd now be our supper!"

**Finally**, Paul was certain they were chosen because they lived in **anticipation of Christ's return**. *'...and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.'* 1 Thessalonians 1:10 **The gospel response of the Thessalonians was to live in the light of Christ's imminent return.** Only those who love Him are waiting for Him. The sure and certain truth is that Jesus is coming again. I think Jesus is coming sooner than most people think, but, of course, most people aren't thinking about it at all. And unless you have heard and responded to the gospel, unless the power of the Holy Spirit has convicted you of sin, righteousness and the coming judgment, unless your life bears witness to a joyful endurance of affliction, unless there is a clear testimony of a changed life about you and your heart is breaking for those still without Christ in this world – you won't be anticipating His return – you won't be living with a view to His coming – you won't even be thinking about it. But for those chosen by God and whose hearts have been impacted and changed by the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, there can be no other response than to live in the light of Christ's return.

And so Paul reminded the Thessalonians of their posture in light of Christ's return. He says to *'...wait for His Son from heaven...'* Paul says, 'You turned to the living God from dead idols and now your life is all about **waiting for His Son's return**. This is not your final destination. Don't get attached to this life – don't get seduced by this world – you are here – **waiting** for Christ to come again. It is a waiting that echoes the cry of the early church – **Maranatha – even so come Lord Jesus!** Paul makes it clear that it is not an idle, passive sort of passing-the-time kind of waiting, but rather it is **a waiting full of expectancy**, with our eyes on heaven, and our hearts free from earthly entanglements, and busily engaged in His work on earth. This verb is in the present active form which means they were not merely sitting on their backsides for something to happen.

The year between 999 and 1000 AD were characterized by excessive speculation about Christ's second coming among Christians, so much so that it led to social and economic chaos as farmers didn't plant crops for the next year, buildings weren't repaired, and the details of daily life were neglected because they thought Christ would return in the new year. On the last day of 999 the basilica of St. Peter's at Rome was filled with people who were weeping and trembling as they expected the world to end. They were waiting, but it wasn't a waiting that was productive. Jesus told His disciples in Luke 12: *Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes* Luke 12:35-37a And then Jesus goes on to point out that those who truly are waiting for His return are **actively engaged in kingdom business**. *Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.* Luke 12:43 Waiting for the Son means that we should be found **'so doing'** when He comes. So doing means that our hearts and minds and souls are focused on things above and not on things below. His kingdom is our passion and priority.

What we do here on earth should be done in the light of Christ's coming and the knowledge that we will meet Him face to face at His coming. G. Campbell Morgan, a preacher from the last century said ***"To me the second coming is the perpetual light in the path which makes the present bearable. I never lay my head on my pillow without thinking that: maybe before the morning breaks the final morning may have dawned. I never begin my work without thinking perhaps He may interrupt my work and begin His own."***

Waiting for the Son is a mark of those who have been chosen by God. There is a kind of joyous anticipation and expectation of Christ's return that fills their days, colors their decisions, tempers their passions, and marks their lives. Are you one of these? Are you waiting for the Son? If you have no confidence that you are chosen by God, I urge you now to respond to the gospel that has the power to save, and confirm your election by calling on the Son of God who came to save those who were lost. To hear and respond to the call of God is to confirm His choosing. *'For as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.'* John 1:12

*Our gracious God and loving Father,*

*Mere thanks alone cannot express the magnitude of our gratitude to You for choosing us and saving us. We are staggered by the display of Your grace and mercy to us and our hearts respond in adoration and praise. Grant O Lord that this truth would penetrate our hearts and saturate our thinking so that all our days and all our doing would be marked by it. May our work of faith and labors of love and steadfastness of hope be cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving by others and resound to the praise of the glory of Your grace. Let the evidence of Your choosing be displayed in our lives as we daily embrace and respond to the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. May it be found in our joyful endurance of affliction, a passion for the lost and in the reality of changed lives.*

*Let joyous anticipation and expectation of Your soon return fill our hearts and our days, and don't let the temptations of this present world seduce us away from the everlasting pleasure of knowing Christ and the sweet assurance of His return. For those who do not have the assurance that they are chosen of God, saved, sealed and secure in Your everlasting arms, I pray that today would be the day of their salvation. You have the power to break through sin-hardened hearts and overcome all resistance to Your grace. Fill our souls with the delight of knowing You and spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*