

October 10, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return *Chosen To Be Saved*

2 Thessalonians 2:13 – 17

We saw last week that Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians were being shaken and alarmed by bad teaching about the second coming of Christ and they were losing the ability to think clearly and they had become agitated, anxious and fretful. Their ship of faith was in serious jeopardy of being cut adrift from its moorings. The cause of all this confusion was a false teaching from those who claimed to have authority from the Holy Spirit, or prophetic utterings, even producing supposed letters from Paul that upheld their view. They suggested that the persecutions and afflictions the Thessalonians were enduring were part of the judgements of the Day of the Lord and that the gathering of the saints had already happened and the Thessalonians had somehow missed it. And we saw that the way Paul deals with bad teaching and wavering faith and uncertain hearts is to give out a healthy dose of the truth. In order to supply their hearts with more faith and help them persevere through persecution and suffering he teaches them the objective truth about God and the ways of God.

So Paul tells them essentially that this can't be because the apostasy had not happened and even though the mystery of lawlessness was at work, the man of lawlessness had yet to be revealed: *Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the [apostasy] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,* 1 Thessalonians 2:3 That is, there is going to be a massive falling away from the truth by professing Christians, and that will be brought to a final climax by someone who comes in the power of Satan to do supernatural signs and wonders that will deceive many into embracing the lie. *The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false [the lie], in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.* 1 Thessalonians 2:9 – 12

The point I believe Paul is making here is two-fold: **don't make signs and wonders the ground of your faith and the standard of truth**; and **be those who know and love the truth. To know the truth and love the truth is to know and love the author of truth.** The only sure and certain defense against the apostasy and the man of lawlessness is a deeper love for God and for His truth. If we know and love the **truth**, if we treasure Christ above all things, if He is our portion and our inheritance, if we love the glory of His gospel and the supremacy of His rule, then we will not be deceived by the man of lawlessness, and we will not be those who fall away from the truth, and our love will not grow cold and we will endure to the end and be saved.

But if you do not know and love the truth, you will be deceived by the man of lawlessness to such an extent that instead of knowing and loving the truth, **you will know and love the lie.** That is what verse 11 says, *so that they may believe what is false – literally – so that they may believe the lie.* The grammar is very specific here – **the lie**, not just **a lie**. Unbelievers are condemned for believing **the lie** so we should ask, **"What is 'The Lie'?"** I believe to answer that we need to go back to Genesis where **the lie** came into the world. Turn to Genesis 3:1-5, and read along with me: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.* Genesis 3:1-6

That is **the lie** – **you** will be like God. The specific lie is in verse 4, but it is simply a manifestation of **The Lie** – **You will be like God.** **At** the root of all sin is the desire to be our own god. It is a desire to be accountable to no one but yourself – to do whatever it is that makes you happy. At its heart, sin is wanting your own way and seeking to satisfy yourself apart from God. That is why Paul tell us in Romans 14:23 that **'Whatever is not from faith is sin'**. Faith is trusting in God and not in ourselves and rejoicing and finding pleasure in His promises and in Him. And when we fail to acknowledge God as God and trust Him for everything, we open ourselves to **the lie**. Which is exactly what Eve did when she began questioning God's good provision for her and Adam. And she refused to believe the truth.

Paul says here in Thessalonians, that because they refused to love the truth, and in so doing, secure their salvation, they loved the lie so much that God essentially hands them over to their love: *Therefore God sends them a strong delusion.* What that means is that because of their refusal to embrace the truth, **a power is set in operation in them that causes them to embrace the lie.**

This is exactly the picture that Paul drew for the Romans in chapter one of that letter: *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.* Romans 1:21-25

In Thessalonians Paul says that these people refuse to believe and love the truth, and instead take pleasure in unrighteousness – in this passage, Paul says that they know that there is a truth to be embraced, but because they would rather pleasure themselves, they reject the truth and embrace the lie. **And in both cases, the result is that God gives them what they most desire.** As we have pointed out before, no one who ends up in hell leaves skidmarks on the road. They go willingly, defiantly and without remorse. If you habitually reject the truth of the gospel, if you prefer to be lord of your life, if you do not embrace and love the truth, you are ripe for the ultimate deception and eventually there comes a point when you are simply handed over to your deepest desires that eventually end in destruction.

But thanks be to God for His merciful lovingkindness to us! He has not left us to our own devices and as Paul says, **He has chosen us to be saved.** *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.* 1 Thessalonians 2:13 In this brief statement, Paul highlights some key truths. First of all he calls those who have embraced and loved the truth, **beloved of the Lord.** This is the particular, saving love of God that breaks in on us when we were dead in sin and trespasses, rebellious and hostile to Him, hating God and hating His word, and utterly resistant to the gospel, and pours out His love into our hearts and ignites our affections for Him. Who among us who have believed on Christ does not remember when all at once we realized that we did love God and He loved us?

Charles Finney was an unbelieving lawyer in 1821 when he was converted to Christ. And his description of the day of his salvation included a powerful testimony of how God miraculously saved him and wiped away his incredible sense of sin and guilt and flooded his heart with divine love. He wrote in his journal: *'Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love, for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect distinctly that it seemed to fan me, like immense wings. No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say, I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, "I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me." I said, "Lord, I cannot bear any more;" yet I had no fear of death'.*

Our love for God and His love demonstrated to us is one of the strongest indications that we are chosen of God. A lot of people wrestle with this particular doctrine – the doctrine of **election** or predestination – that says: **God elects, or chooses, before the foundation of the world whom He will save and whom He will pass by and leave to unbelief and sin and rebellion.** And He does this on no other basis than His own sovereign will. That the Bible teaches this is clear and here are some texts to bring it into focus for us.

Jesus told His disciples that although they had consciously made the decision to follow Him, the ultimate factor in their decision was His choosing: *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give it to you.* John 15:16 And Paul tells us that this choosing took place before we ever had the opportunity ourselves to choose in the letter to the Ephesians: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.* Ephesians 1:3-4 We saw in the first letter to the Thessalonians that Paul reminded them of their election: *For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you* 1 Thessalonians 1:4

All through the New Testament, the saints are constantly called 'chosen' or 'elect', as in Colossians where Paul says: ***Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,*** Colossians 3:12 And Peter, writing to the saints in Asia Minor says: ***Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:*** 1 Peter 1:1-2 And in the book of Acts we read where Paul was preaching the gospel in Antioch and both Jews and Gentiles were there and the Bible says: ***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

And should we still be unconvinced we should consider the eighth chapter of Romans that says: ***And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*** Romans 8:28-30 The Bible is very clear that in His divine sovereignty and will, God has chosen a people out of all the tribes and tongues and nations that have ever walked the earth to be the holy people of God. It is not my intent this morning to prove the justice of God in electing some and passing over others, but rather to let the word of God speak to our hearts and transform our thinking.

There are those who will say, 'That is not fair of God to choose some and pass over others' and to those I would ask this: 'Is there any desire within you to be holy, any desire to know God and the things of God; do you want to leave the life of sin and walk in holiness?' If you answer yes to that, then I believe we can conclude that you are among the elect. But if you say 'No, I'd rather not be holy, I don't want to give up the pleasures of sin, I don't want to be ruled by God, I am happy as my own master', ***why would you then complain that God has not chosen you?*** Because, by your own admission, you wouldn't like it if you had been elected. You have acknowledged that you don't want God, you would rather be left alone, how then can you grumble against God's choice of another? If you love Him, then He has chosen you to it – if you don't, ***what right do you have to say that God ought to have given you what you do not want?***

If you wrestle with this question, just know that many have wrestled before you. Charles Spurgeon was one of those, and at the end of his wrestling he came to this conclusion: ***Look to Jesus, believe on Him, and you shall make proof of your election directly, for as surely as you believe, you are elect. If you will give yourself wholly up to Christ and trust Him, then you are one of God's chosen ones. Go to Jesus just as you are. Go straight to Christ, hide in His wounds, and you shall know your election. Christ was at the everlasting council. He can tell you whether you were chosen or not, but you cannot find out in any other way. Go and put your trust in Him. There will be no doubt about His having chosen you, when you have chosen Him.*** Charles Spurgeon

That is the other side of God's choosing – ***we must choose.*** If we never choose Him, it is sure and certain proof that He did not choose us. That is why we preach the gospel as those whose hearts break for the lost. That is why the gospel demands a response – we must choose. We are not automotons to be sort of radio-controlled from heaven. God told His people in Deuteronomy: ***I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.*** Deuteronomy 30:19 ***Choose this day whom you will serve*** Joshua told the people in Joshua 24:15 And Paul begged the Corinthians: ***Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*** 2 Corinthians 5:20

Just as crucial to our faith as the doctrine of election, is the fact that ***the means through which God carries out His perfect will in election is through holiness and truth. 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.*** 1 Thessalonians 2:13 Our election to salvation is through the process of something the Bible calls 'sanctification' and belief in the truth. Sanctification is another word for 'holiness', and believing in the truth is to have faith to be saved. ***Our election is not to heaven as it were, but to holiness and faith.*** God has chosen His people to be holy and full of faith, ***living lives that reflect His holy standard and demonstrating that we indeed know and love the truth.***

Don't miss this. Those whom God has chosen from the foundation of the world to be saved, will prove to be those whom He elected through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and through belief in the truth. In other words, there is a life-long process set in motion when we first believe that results in final salvation, the redemption of our bodies. **Sanctification or holiness is a requirement for salvation.** Hebrews 12:14 says, *'Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.'* Hebrews 12:14 There are those who say that because they are elect, they are eternally secure, and I would agree...with a caution. If by 'eternally secure' you mean that it doesn't matter what you do between now and heaven, I would say that at the least you are delusional, and at the worst you are still unconverted. It does matter. **Evidence of God's grace in election means that we are pursuing holiness with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.**

Peter tells us to pursue holiness **because** we have been chosen, and the evidence that we have been chosen is that we **are** pursuing holiness. Listen to what he says: *Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love...Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble* 2 Peter 1:5-7,10 In other words, those who have been chosen and called are those who run after God with all their heart.

Most of us have been infected with the erroneous idea that salvation is a one-off. That is, one day we prayed a prayer, signed a card, made a confession, and we were **'saved'**. But this passage makes it clear that salvation does not just begin and end with the declaration that 'Jesus is Lord' but is a process that begins by embracing the truth about Christ and knowing and loving that truth to the point that it infects our whole manner of life so that one day our confession that Jesus is Lord brings us face to face with the One we love. **No one will be saved without holiness and without faith.** And no one is saved by a decree in eternity past but by believing in Christ and trusting Him for salvation. We hold these truths to be equally true – **God elects and we must choose.** We have divine sovereignty in election and we have our responsibility in choosing life.

If you are concerned today that you may not be among the chosen, ask yourself these questions: **Is** there a desire for holiness deep within? Do I want God – do I want more of God? Is His word a delight to my mind and food for my soul? Is there a sense in which I am striving for *more* of Christ in my life? Do I want His will to prevail in me, even though I struggle sometimes with control? Is the taste for the pleasures of sin like ashes in my mouth, even though I occasionally fall prey to its temptations? If you can answer yes then you bear the brand of those who are elect. If you cannot answer yes to these – then it is time to go to your knees for mercy and grace from the eternal throne. You cannot get off by saying, 'O well, God did not choose me'.

The choice is yours and you cannot blame God if you do not choose. As D.L. Moody put it: **"I come to the door of salvation and see written over it 'Whosoever will may come.' I enter the door, and look above it, and it says, 'Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.'"** Christ died so that whosoever will may be saved. If you are here this morning and you are unsure about your eternal status, I urge you by the mercies of God to be reconciled to Him today.

Our gracious Father,

Oh how we love Your word that brings us life. May the word we have heard this morning both thrill and stagger our souls. May it thrill our hearts as we savor the joy of knowing Jesus, and may it stagger us with the infinite kindness of Your grace toward us. Grant that we would know and love and embrace the truth of Your sovereign choice to save sinners like us and exult in the mercy that flowed from heaven's throne to redeem and cleanse and sanctify Your people. Conquer all other loves with the surpassing love of Christ and break our bondage to the suicidal deceit of sin with generous applications of Your truth. Let us be those who know and love the truth, who treasure Christ above all things and love the glory of His gospel and the supremacy of His rule. Grant that we would delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.