

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17
Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 18, 2009

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 (New International Version)

Stand Firm

13But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you^[a] to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings^[b] we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

16May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Every day the news seems to get worse. The stock market takes another dive. More companies announce layoffs. The size of the proposed economic stimulus keeps growing, which will increase the national debt. And that's just the financial news. Fighting happens in Israel. Strife in Afghanistan grows. The weather smacks us with snow and cold. As we survey today's world it's easy to get down.

You didn't make the effort to come here to wallow in sadness. Turn off all those negative thoughts, for God has some good news to share with us through the Apostle Paul today. Our study of the Second Lesson for today shows us

GOD CIRCLES YOU WITH GOODNESS

- I. He chose you from the beginning
- II. He encourages and strengthens you for life
- III. He prepared glory for eternity

God chose you from the beginning. He looked at you in love and said, "I want you in my family." Parents who adopt children may speak of them as "chosen babies" to remind them they are special and loved, lest they feel something was missing because they didn't have the time in mother's womb and the anticipation, followed by the excitement on the day of birth. Yet that choice often isn't individual. The parents were happy to receive any placement or the selection was from only a few possibilities. God chose you personally from the mass of humanity.

At the time of anniversaries and similar events we look back. Paul takes us way back. "From the beginning God chose you," he said. Before the clock was started, before He created anything, and definitely before you or I existed, He made that choice. Clearly it was not the result of anything we had done or deserved. Our election was an act of God's love and grace, His goodness entirely.

His election of you was not merely a statement of desire. He acted on it and carried it out in your life. "He called you to this through our gospel." He arranged the circumstances of your life so that you came in contact with the gospel. In the case of the Thessalonians, Paul and his helpers came and preached in their city. It happened during Paul's second missionary journey, after they had crossed onto the continent of Europe. For many of us it meant that we were born into a Christian family who had us baptized, taught us of Jesus at home, and brought us to church and Sunday School or daily Christian schools. Or maybe it was a spouse who led us to know the Savior personally. Perhaps a friend introduced us to Jesus like Philip with Nathanael as we heard in an earlier Scripture reading. Someone proclaimed to us the gospel, the good news that Jesus came, lived a sinless life as our substitute and died on the cross to rescue us from sin.

As we heard that precious message, something was happening inside: "the sanctifying work of the Spirit." The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, pried open the hard, rejecting heart we all have by nature. He planted faith in us. He led us to trust Jesus as our one and only Savior, our sole hope for eternity. He was sanctifying us or setting us apart from the unbelieving world so that we became part of God's family of faith.

What else could you call it but love? His goodness preceded our existence and entered our life in the past. Our lives were frontloaded with grace. We owe all to Him. He chose us; He came and found us like He did with Philip. His Spirit produced faith in our hearts. All glory and praise to God!

II.

God's goodness keeps right on coming as He encourages and strengthens you for life. He wants you to continue in faith. "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter." Don't give up what you have received. Challenges to our faith are plenty. When Paul preached in Thessalonica a large number believed and a congregation formed. But there was also opposition. Some Jews objected to the preaching of Christ's name. They rounded up a bunch of idlers, formed a mob, and started a riot. Paul and Silas had to flee for their lives after only three weeks in the city. You can be sure the troubles didn't stop for the members just because the missionaries were gone. In the previous verses Paul warned against a special false teacher who was at work already then and would remain until the end of time, namely, the Antichrist, who deceives many. There are many other false teachers twisting and distorting God's truths. Satan is constantly at work and our sinful nature listens all too readily and raises doubts about the Bible and its teachings.

Yet the text called on us to stand firm, to be rock solid. Give up nothing of what Paul taught in person or by letter. (Remember he had written before, as this text is from his second letter to them.) Watch out for attacks that lead you to rely on yourself for standing with the Lord. Keep Jesus number one in your life.

How does that happen? God encourages your heart. He keeps sending His message and the Spirit keeps working. The Holy Spirit hasn't lost power over the years. He builds your faith as the gospel assures you of forgiveness daily. That's why we don't want to separate ourselves from the Word. Hear it in worship. Grow in faith through any of our numerous avenues of Bible study for all ages. Use God's Word in your home. The Spirit will bless your faith. Your standing firm is God's goodness at work. He won't let you down.

He also leads you to live your faith. Faith in the heart shows in life. The prayer of the text included that God would "strengthen you in every good deed and word." Since we love the Savior we want to follow His ways. We learn to say like Samuel in today's First Lesson, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." We put our faith into practice. We strive to obey God's commandments. Doing so brings glory to God and helps our neighbor. We follow His moral principles; we respect others; we show kindness and support them. May the world see Christ's love in action in your life!

Our words are also involved. They are right and pure. We praise God and uplift those around us. We speak the truth. We do it in love, to encourage others. We speak the greatest truth as we share God's Word. We will hear more about that next week in our focus on outreach and evangelism.

Living our faith is our desire all the time as God's children. All too often we fail. Our loving heavenly Father forgives us, picks us up, and sends us forth again. Don't quit. Your Savior, who has done so much for you, deserves your best effort. You are not trying to save yourself or to gain credit with Him. You want to thank Him for His goodness that continues daily.

III.

The best part of His goodness is yet to come. He prepared glory for eternity. We will share in that glory. God is glorious. He dwells in majesty in heaven. Jesus left that glory for a time as He humbled Himself to save the world. He returned to that glory when He had completed winning our redemption, shown in His triumphant descent to hell to proclaim His victory over Satan, in His resurrection body no longer subject to earthly limitations, and in returning to heaven. There He is in a bright and beautiful scene. He exercises divine power at God's right hand.

Our Lord had a purpose for calling you to be His own: "That you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." It's not something you and I have fully experienced yet. Life is presently a struggle as we deal with sin and its consequences. There are the problems everyone faces like

sickness, aches and pains, accidents and disappointments, and others are added because we are believers, such as persecution and mockery.

That all changes when we leave this earth. Behind us are all sin and sorrow. Stretching out before us is only goodness. We rest from our labors. After judgment day we will have a glorified body. While we don't know exactly what we will look like, we will be free of imperfections. Our existence will be glorious like that of our risen Savior. We will serve before His throne with joy.

So be optimistic. With a future like that, we know God's goodness. It is a gift, entirely won by Jesus, who removed our sin and qualified us for entrance to heaven. We look forward to our eternal future with eager anticipation.

That eternal joy is certain so it affects us now. We know the troubles and burdens of today will not last. We can hang on. We know we are loved. That future glory far counterbalances even the worst that happens to us now. If God has that future planned for you, He won't forget about you now. He will guide and guard and bless you. Know these truths and trust Him. Live in anticipation of your future. With Christmas and other special events, we look forward to them, we make preparations, and then all of a sudden they're over. Heavenly glory lasts forever.

God's goodness filled your past in His eternal election and in calling you to faith. His unlimited goodness is waiting in the future. His goodness is also here in the present as He forgives you and strengthens your faith with His assurances of love. He surrounds or circles you with goodness. Live in trust. No matter what troubles today brings, be filled with joy and certainty.