

2 Thessalonians: Chosen for Salvation

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Prayer of Illumination

Holy, Holy, Holy God,
Guide us by the Spirit of truth
To hear the Word of life you speak,
That echoes and reverberates from your Word.
And may we now and always
give all glory, honor, and praise
To your threefold name;
All through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

The most-covered modern song is Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*. Wikipedia tells us there are at least 300 known versions of Cohen's haunting and heartfelt song.

The goal of a song cover is to make it recognizable, yet distinctive. No one did it better than Jeff Buckley with Cohen's *Hallelujah*. Listening to him is like listening to an angel sing.

When covering a song you want to reinvent the song in creative and interesting ways while still associating it with the original version. *Will Price will now give us another rendition and taste of this powerful song. Will played this "Broken Hallelujah" version at a recent memorial service for a young woman.—Thank you, Will.*

The book of 2nd Thessalonians can also be thought of as a song cover of 1 Thessalonians. The content is similar, but the tone has changed. The heightened persecution and increasing suffering of Christians in Thessalonica have contributed to a harsher tone in 2 Thessalonians compared to Paul's first letter. And so Paul and the Thessalonians are having to be spiritually scrappy to stay alive and stay faithful. Yet the overall theme remains:

Have a warm and upbeat reception of the gospel, as Paul previously affirmed the Thessalonians, that they've "turned away from idols to serve the true and living God."

Keep growing in your faith—don't settle or stagnate. Put your faith into practice. Keep it real and active. Set out to do good to one another and all people. The good hope God gives works itself out in a good life.

Yes, evil is at work in the world—we can't be naïve. But there's a greater and more powerful force at work—God's work of love in Christ Jesus.

Because God is love and God loves, he chooses us. God's love is eternal. It precedes evil and will overcome evil. God's love always wins, sooner or later. This gives us good hope to carry on.

Paul also encourages us: work hard. Avoid idleness—as the saying goes, “idle hands are the devil's workshop.” The devil always finds work for the idle hands to do.

To counteract this Paul give us and the Thessalonians a challenge, “Make it your aim to live a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to earn your own living ... in order to win the respect of those who do not believe.”

Show the world Christians are good and grounded people. And all the while, patiently and resolutely endure life's inevitable trials and tribulations.

And keep a cool head too. Wait for the Lord's return, but don't get caught up in strange and distracting teachings about the end times. Stand firm and steadfast to the end, faithfully doing what Christ calls you to do, day in and day out, rain or shine.

This morning we're going to read Paul's second thanksgiving in 2 Thessalonians. This is an important reminder of how crucial gratitude is for the Christian.

Notice also the faint echoes and tracks left by the Triune God in this passage—God, Jesus, and Spirit.

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 (NRSV)

“But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.”

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – 2 Thessalonians: Chosen for Salvation

Karl Barth is one of the greatest theologians in church history. He's a spiritual giant and hero to me. He stood against Hitler and stood for Christ. You can see some rare video footage of him on my Facebook page.

In a passage from his massive thirteen-volume *Church Dogmatics*, Barth spoke eloquently about how grace and gratitude always go together. Here's the gist of it:

Grace always demands the answer of gratitude.

Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth.
Grace evokes gratitude like the voice evokes an echo.
Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning.

We're speaking of the grace of the God who is God for man,
and of the gratitude of man as his response to God's grace.

The two, grace and gratitude, belong together, hand in hand,
so that only gratitude can correspond to grace.

The failure of gratitude is ingratitude, and this is sin,
probably the greatest of all sins—ingratitude.

In fact, Barth says basically *all sin* is simply ingratitude—The human refusal of the one but necessary thing which is proper to and required of us by God.

As far as people are concerned there can be no question of anything *but* gratitude. Gratitude is the appropriate response to which men and women must necessarily fulfil.

The Spirit makes us response-able to God's grace with a life of gratitude.

We are a chosen people, Immanuel. Our assurance of salvation doesn't rest upon us, but upon the glorious truth that God chose us. When Paul says that we are the first fruits of God, he is saying that from the very beginning of time God set us apart for his special purpose and passion. This salvation is miraculously unlocked in our lives through the gift of faith that responds to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God bakes into this a divine balance of grace and gratitude. The gospel begins and ends in what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. We can tap into a divine Source to stand firm and hold fast to Christ and the living tradition and teachings about him passed down to us over the centuries.

The great Church Historian Jaroslav Pelikan said it concisely and beautifully:

Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people.
Tradition is the living faith of dead people.

And Immanuel, we are a people who choose the latter. Let us firmly grasp the truth of the living gospel that never lets us go!

The great Scottish Presbyterian New Testament scholar Ernest "Paddy" Best gives us the best guidance on how to discern the difference between dead traditionalism and living tradition:

In whatever ways Christianity is expressed and lived it cannot be dissociated from Jesus; the traditions about him are embedded in a first century Palestinian setting which is very different from ours; yet they cannot be rejected, which would be to throw out the baby with the bath water, but the [living traditions] *must be re-interpreted*.

This is our task and calling as faithful modern-day followers of Jesus. Reject outmoded traditions, but never reject Jesus.

This is how Paul tells us that we, always by God's grace, "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is our path and our prize. Our means and our end. This is the meaning of life.

Christ formed in us, more and more. It's here we find ourselves in God's sweet spot. No matter what's going on—good or bad, still waters or troubled waters, we can be who we are—little Christs. We can receive and experience and extend Paul's blessing:

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word."

We are a people who enjoy eternal comfort and good hope. Another translation says we have unfailing courage. Grateful for God's grace we live life with undaunted courage, no matter our circumstances, no matter what gets in our way.

Lewis and Clark were well into their famous expedition commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson. A defining moment was when they found themselves staring at the Rocky Mountains. This wasn't what they were expecting. The massive mountain range wasn't *supposed* to be there. They were told they would be gazing at a waterway to the Pacific Ocean. They were well-prepared for the waterway with their canoes. But not the mountains. And the problem is, *you can't canoe the mountains*.

Lewis and Clark had to adapt and improvise, rather than refuse to change or give up in despair. So they chucked their plans. Gave up their pipe dreams of a water way. *This* was a time for undaunted courage in the face of adversity. So, they sold their canoes ... and bought horses and got guides. *Now* they could continue their mission. *Now* they were equipped to tackle their obstacle and cross the Rocky Mountains. And they did it. One of the greatest expeditions in the history of the world. But to do this, they had to change course and adapt their game plan and assumptions.

Life has a way of confounding our expectations. Stuff happens. The bananas hit the fan. In those times we're not alone. Not left high and dry. Jesus is there for us. When we only have canoes, Jesus gives us horses. And food for the journey. We just have to trust.

In this mission of faith we find ourselves on, Immanuel, we've got to trust Jesus and roll with him and roll with the punches. They will come. And never, ever give up when you find yourself staring down your own personal Rocky Mountains when you were supposed to have smooth sailing.

In these mountain moments, Paul reminds us that we're chosen. Our Presbyterian ears should perk up when we hear "chosen." This is one of our distinguishing marks dear Presbyterian people! God chose you by the Spirit's power to make you a holy people when you find yourself muttering under your breath, "Holy shitake mushrooms!" In these times of stress and distress, we remember that we're chosen for salvation, destined for glory!

But it doesn't stop there. It doesn't stop with us. Other Bible passages speak of the purpose of our election. We are:

Chosen for charity.
Selected to serve.
Blessed to be a blessing.
Elected to evangelize.

Let us, by the grace of God, BE WHO WE ARE and DO IT Immanuel!

All you need is faith the size of a mustard seed, and you can tell those Rocky mountains to be thrown into the sea.

The way is prepared for our Lord. The way is prepared for us to follow our Lord, together. Unimpeded, we keep calm and carry on. Grace to our right. Gratitude to our left, to the very end.

Amen.

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