

Stand Firm and Take Comfort

2 Thessalonians 2.13-17

In 2 Thess. 2.1-12, Paul writes about a time of great evil and terrible judgment that is coming on the earth. All unbelievers who are alive will go through it. How should Christians respond to this truth? We learn this morning that we should stand firm, and take comfort.

Thank God! – and Stand Firm (13-15)

- Christians are saved from the time of Tribulation (13)
- Christians will share in Christ's kingdom glory (14)
- As a result...stand firm in truths of the faith (15)

Trust God! – and Take Comfort (16-17)

- God loves us, and gives His comfort and hope (16)
- Let God comfort and strengthen you to do good (17)

**2 Thessalonians 2.13-17**

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.

In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a bartender from the Bronx, won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. She quickly made a name for herself, announcing that climate change would 'destroy the planet' in 12 years. Unless the government enacted radical changes, which she summarized in her Green New Deal, the polar icecap would melt, major cities would be under water, and wild storms would kill millions. It would be the end of the world as we know it. Doomsday forecasts are nothing new. Hollywood has been scaring us with the end of the world scenarios since the 1950s. Nuclear disaster, a coming ice age, alien attacks, global warming, a comet hitting earth, and even the effects of a deadly virus have all frightened us out of our wits. But today, instead of just watching movies and munching popcorn, doomsday predictions are announced as though they were fact in our children's classes at school and on the evening news.

Millions of people today are living in mortal fear of the imminent end of life as we know it. We're 9 days away from a presidential election, and candidates are scaring us: *Elect me or everyone is going to die!*

What is especially interesting to me is that in all my years as a pastor, I've never seen so many Christians expecting the end of life as we know it, with Jesus returning to take us to be with Him. Scripture clearly tells us two things about this day: We don't know when it will be, but if we pay attention, we can observe signs that it is near. Jesus told us to look for these signs – and Paul describes some of them in the first twelve verses of 2 Thess. 2. You want to know something interesting? If you observe what is going on in the world today, you will discover that there is a lot more evidence for the soon return of Christ than there is that climate change is about to destroy the world! But whenever the Lord does come for us, it is going to be sudden and unexpected; we will be taken to be with the Lord, and a time of wickedness and terrible judgment on the earth will follow.

Until then, Christians live each day knowing that the end is near. Why does God tell us this? So that we will take every opportunity to share the gospel with those who are lost, and so that many unbelievers will put their trust in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. But there's more.

Today we begin the application section of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. He's just finished correcting the false teaching they had received. He assures them that they have not missed the Rapture. *They aren't living in the Tribulation period.* Those times are coming, and they

will be worse than anything this world has ever known, but those judgments are going to come on unbelievers – not Christians. Twice, in verses 10 and 12, Paul is clear: These judgments come on 'those who didn't receive the love of the truth,' and who did not 'believe the truth.'

But as we wait for Jesus to come for us, what dangers do we need to be aware of? As the world unravels all around us, what can keep us from unraveling with it? As we wait for Jesus' return, what truths can keep us full of joy and hope and serving the Lord?

The answer is found in the last five verses of chapter two. Twice in these verses, Paul shines his spotlight on God and His goodness toward us, then turns the spotlight to illuminate what our response to His goodness should be. Paul's first exhortation, in verses 13-15, is summarized this way: *Thank God! – and Stand Firm (13-15).*

Thank God! – and Stand Firm (13-15)

- Christians are saved from the time of Tribulation (13)

Paul is clearly giving thanks to God in verse 13: *But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.* The question is: What is Paul thanking God for doing for the Thessalonian Christians?

The phrase in the middle of the verse – *God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation*, is the issue. Many Bible teachers today say that this means that God chose the people in Thessalonica who believed in Jesus to be

saved in eternity past; that long before He created the world, God chose some people to be saved. This may sound strange to you – since if God chose to save some and not save others, that hardly seems fair. And if God chose to send some to hell, then how can we ever say that God loves the world? I submit to you that we can't.

This idea was articulated clearly by a Reformer named John Calvin nearly 500 years ago. He wrote this:

...there could be no election without its opposite reprobation. God is said to set apart those whom he adopts for salvation... Those therefore whom God passes by he reprobates, and that for no other cause but because he is pleased to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines to his children. (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3:23, sec. 1, 225)

Alister McGrath, an expert on Calvin's teaching, writes:

God cannot be thought of as doing something by default. He is active and sovereign in His actions. Therefore God actively wills the salvation of those who will be saved and the damnation of those who will not be saved. (Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 125.)

Today, many preachers and theologians follow Calvin and his theological system. John MacArthur, a well-known author and pastor in southern California, writes this:

God loves believers with a particular love. . . It is an eternal love that guarantees their salvation from sin and its ghastly penalty. . . Such love clearly is not directed toward all of mankind indiscriminately, but is bestowed uniquely and individually on those whom God chose in eternity past. (John MacArthur, *The God Who Loves* (Nashville, Tenn., W Publishing Group, 2001), 16-17.)

If you're thinking that this doesn't sound like the biblical God who loves the world (John 3.16), who 'desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2.4), who is 'not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance' (2 Pet. 3.9) you're right. A God who creates beings who he has already condemned to an eternal hell is not the God of the Bible. But then what do we do with this verse? Is there another interpretation that of this verse that doesn't make God into an arbitrary and capricious deity in His dealings with mankind? Yes.

The correct meaning of this verse is that Christians are saved from the time of Tribulation. Everything in this letter points to this. The Thessalonians were deceived by false teachers telling them they were in the Tribulation time. Paul has responded that *unbelievers* will go through the Tribulation, but not Christians. The "salvation" Paul refers to here is the same salvation he wrote them about in his first letter, in 1 Thess. 5.9: *God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* The time of God's wrath is coming, but we will be saved from it because of our faith in Jesus Christ.

But what about the rest of the phrase in v13 – that *God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation*? What is ‘the beginning’? It’s obvious from the rest of the verse: When they first believed, and the Holy Spirit ‘sanctified’ them. The day they put their faith in Jesus Christ, God chose them to be saved from the time of Tribulation that is coming on the world. Doesn’t this make sense?

Imagine that the day your child is born, you open a trust fund for him. Years later, perhaps he is 10 or 12 years old, you sit him down, and say, “Son, from the beginning of your life – the moment you were born – I have chosen to bless you with a trust fund, and one day, it will all be yours!” Paul gives thanks to God that from the beginning of the Thessalonian Christians’ spiritual lives, God has chosen to bless them with salvation from the time of wrath that is coming on the earth. That is something to be thankful for! – but that’s not all.

- Christians will share in Christ’s kingdom glory (14)

Not only do Christians escape the coming time of God’s wrath on the earth, they also gain a share in the glory of Christ when He returns to reign.

Let me pause here and inject a little good news into our lives as Christians. When you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, you get a new ‘eternal address’: Heaven is your forever home. Your sins are forgiven, and you are a new creation in Christ. That’s *forever*.

You also receive blessings in the *present*: The Holy Spirit indwells you, giving you His presence and power to help

you defeat sin and grow in faith. You become part of the body of Christ, which displays God’s presence and power in the world. You receive spiritual gifts, which God uses through you to build up the body of Christ. That’s *now*.

But Paul here points to a third category of benefits every person who believes in Jesus as Savior possesses because of God’s grace: In the coming day of the Lord, Christians are taken to be with Christ during the Great Tribulation, and will return with Jesus at His Second Coming to reign on earth. That’s in the *future*.

- As a result...stand firm in truths of the faith (15)

When you grasp all that God has given to us in Christ, it affects the way you live your life. That’s why Paul urges the Thessalonian Christians in v15: *So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.*

When Paul wrote this letter about 51 A.D., false teachers were already in the church. There are still false teachers today. Some of them honestly think they have the truth and that everyone else is wrong. They think they’re doing the Lord’s work. Others are out to undermine the faith of Christians. They hate the idea of God and His truth.

Satan is a master of disguise. The Bible says he disguises himself as an angel of light, and those who do his bidding as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11.14-15). You want to ‘stand firm’ in the faith? You need to read your Bible every day, get in a Bible study with others, and ask God to give you wisdom as you apply it to your life. This isn’t

a game; it's a battle. So hold to God's Word. Make time for it in your life. God has chosen you as a believer in Jesus Christ to be saved from the Great Tribulation time, and to share in Christ's kingdom glory, so stand firm and hold to the teachings of His Word.

Trust God! – and Take Comfort (16-17)

Paul ends with a prayer of desire: To put it simply, Paul prays that what God has lovingly given us will become a reality in our lives. Verse 16 is God's part of the deal, and verse 17 is ours.

- God loves us, and gives His comfort and hope (16)

What has God done for us? He *has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace*. When the world doesn't make sense, when evil has the upper hand, when persecution increases, when standing for your faith costs you – *that's when* the enemy will try to discourage you: *Where's God now? A lot of help He is!* You quench that 'stinkin' thinkin' by remembering God's promise: He has loved you and given you eternal comfort and hope. Just stop and think about that.

- Let God comfort and strengthen you to do good (17)

Then Paul's request: *Since that is what God has done for us* – let it become a reality in your life. Let God *comfort and strengthen your heart in every good work and word*. As you wait expectantly for Jesus to come back for you, take comfort in His promise, and let your assurance and security in Him control what you do and say.

Conclusion

We are nine days out from an election, and while most of us know who we're voting for, biblical theology tells us one thing: No president can make everything right in this country. The legalized murder of more than sixty million babies in the last 47 years, supported by at least half our political leaders, has dulled our national conscience, and invited God's wrath. Sin infests our culture; nothing short of a revival of faith in Jesus Christ can save us.

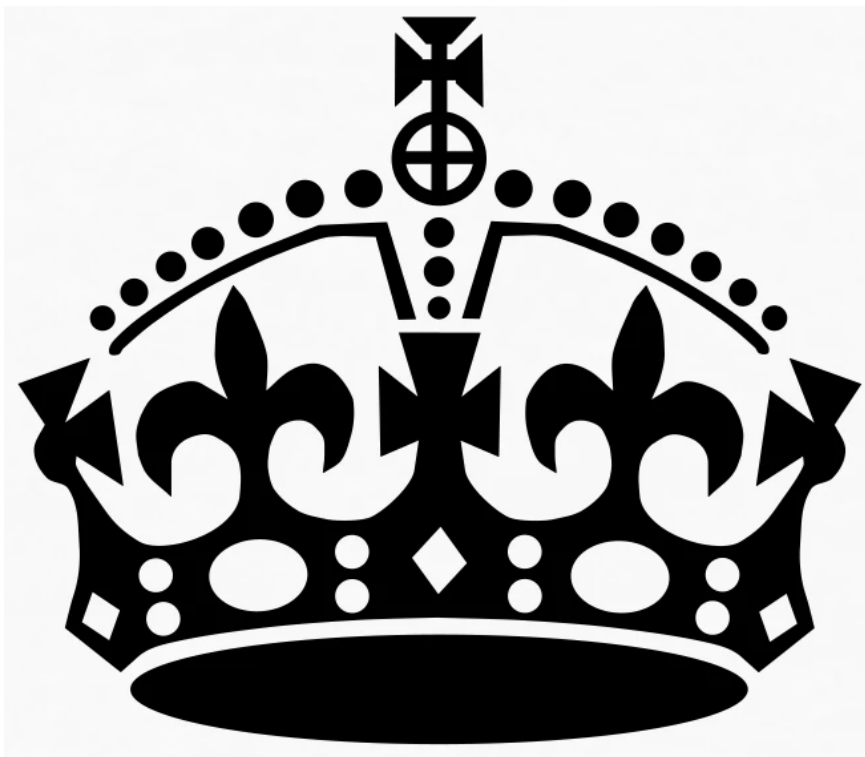
It is in times like these that God's promises shine brighter than ever. As Jesus told His disciples the night before His crucifixion, *In the world you will have tribulation, but take comfort, I have overcome the world* (John 16.33). So I urge you today: Thank God, and stand firm; Trust God, and take comfort.

Twenty years ago the #1 song on country music charts was called "The Girl." The lyrics tell the story of a little girl who hid behind a couch while her drug addict mother and alcoholic father fought, until the night her father shot her mother, then killed himself. The little girl was placed in a foster home where there were 'kisses and hugs every day.' They took her to Sunday School, where there was a picture of Jesus hanging on a cross. The little girl told the teacher, 'I don't know his name, but I know he got off the cross, because he was in my old house, and held me close as I hid behind the couch the night my parents died.'

I know; it's just a song, but even a song can capture some truth. The truth is this: Stand firm and take comfort in the sure promises of God.

Digging Deeper

1. Context is *always* critical in Bible study; Misinterpretations of key passages are usually a result of ignoring context. Let's get our 'contextual bearings' for 2 Thess. 2.13-17. What period of time is the *focus* of 2 Thess. 2.3-12? What group of people will go through this time (2.10, 12)? What group of people will *not* go through this time (1 Thess. 1.10; 4.13-18; 5.9-10)? Which group of people is Paul writing to? Contrast the pronouns in 2.10-12 with those in 2.13-17.
2. A second critical element in properly interpreting Scripture is to correctly define terms. The phrase *God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation* can be easily misunderstood. What meaning do you normally think of when you read "salvation"? Most people think of gaining eternal life and being saved from hell, yet most of the uses of 'saved' or 'salvation' in the NT do *not* refer to this (only about 30% do). Paul used this word in his first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5.9); what did it mean there? Would the same meaning fit here?
3. Let's stay in this phrase a bit longer. Paul gives thanks to God that 'from the beginning' God has 'chosen them for salvation.' Beginning of *what*? Eternity? Creation? Their Christian lives? Which fits best with the meaning of 'salvation' in this context? The word 'chosen' can mean to *select* or *prefer*. What meaning fits here? If I say to my child, *I have chosen to bless you since you were born*, what kind of 'choosing' is that?
4. Enough theology! Paul affirms God's love, grace, and goodness in vv13-14 and 16, and calls us to respond in vv15 and 17. Let's focus on what he wants Christian to do. What does he want the Thessalonian Christians – and by extension, us – to 'stand firm and hold to' in v15? (Careful: What does 'traditions' refer to?) What does he want us to receive from the Lord, and how should it be exhibited, in v17?



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