

## 2 Thessalonians – Lesson 17

### Stand Firm in the Faith

#### Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

1. Review 2 Thessalonians 2:5-12. Why does Paul want the Thessalonians to *recognize* the “*strong delusion*” sent by God over unbelievers? How does it apply to their *present* circumstances?

Paul wants the Thessalonians to remember that God sends a “*strong delusion*” over unbelievers so that the reprobate believe the lie, and this delusion becomes an element of *their own judgment*. This lie is that there is no Christ, or he is *not* coming back, and men are free to live out whatever form of “(im)morality” that *they* can imagine. But, since men cannot shake the *ingrained* sense of morality that has been placed within them by God, from within the *Imago Dei*, they “fight” against it by persecuting the Christian, the *messenger* of Christ. Since they cannot fully “eliminate” his Lordship over them, they strike out against those who follow him. Paul says this so that the Thessalonians *remember* what he told them: their persecution is the *natural* outcome of faith in Christ in the face of those who hate him. They can take *comfort* in this fact, for even the persecution of Christians by the reprobate *becomes* their very judgment.

2. (a) Compare v. 13a to 2 Thessalonians 1:3. List some reasons Paul is *grateful* for the believers in Thessalonica. Why is such gratitude *important*, to Paul and to them?

Paul was sincerely grateful for the Thessalonian believers because: 1) their faith was growing abundantly; 2) their love for one another was increasing; and 3) they were remaining steadfast in the face of persecution and affliction. His gratitude is founded on the fact that they are: 1) beloved by the Lord; 2) chosen as the firstfruits to be saved; and 3) called by God through the gospel that Paul and his team had preached to them. Paul articulates his gratitude because it is the *proper attitude* of those who have been saved *by grace alone*. If it is *entirely* the work of God to rescue a people *from his own wrath*, then it stands to reason that the *only* true response is one of *deep gratitude*. Since the believer can take no “credit” for his own salvation, but is saved *only* out of the *immense generosity* of God in Christ Jesus, then he or she *must* bow down in gratitude!

- (b) Compare the concept of “*firstfruits*” from v. 13b with Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23; James 1:18; and Revelation 14:4. What *are* the various firstfruits listed in these verses?

Paul uses the word “*firstfruits*” to indicate that salvation is the work of God *alone*; that it is *God* who plants, waters, grows, and harvests salvation from the lives of his elect people, for he is the one who *begins this process*, and *sees it through to the end*. For example, in Romans 8, Paul speaks of the *Spirit* as being the “*firstfruits*,” for it is *his* initial work that leads a man to faith and carries him along as he “*eagerly*” awaits for his adoption as a son of God. In 1 Corinthians 15, the term “*firstfruits*” refers to the resurrection of Jesus *as the first one to be raised from the dead*; all of the elect follow Christ in resurrection, for he “*goes before*” his people in this sense. In James 1, the elect are the “*firstfruits*” of all of his creatures; those marked out for salvation by God become the *very first* of mankind, for they have been set aside by him in this unique way. And in Revelation 14, a remnant of 144,000 are redeemed from mankind as “*firstfruits*” for God and the Lamb, a group that are rescued out of the days of tribulation to become the “*bride*” of Christ. The *firstfruits* are the first elements of salvation that flow forth from the hand of God: the *election* of a people, the *resurrection* of Christ, the coming of the *Spirit*, and, as a result, a *remnant* of those saved from all mankind.

(c) What does it mean that God “*chose*” the Thessalonians as the firstfruits to be saved?

The Thessalonian believers, *like all of the elect*, are chosen by God to be included in the harvest that Christ is bringing forth from the earth. They had been set aside in the great Covenant of Peace before the foundation of the world, and they are *now* part of the “remnant” upon the earth of those saved by faith. Their salvation is because *God chose them*, and the coming of the Spirit upon them has raised them from the dead, spiritually, to faith in Christ, and now are part of the family of God, by adoption as their heavenly Father.

3. (a) List the two *means* (in v. 13c) by which salvation had come to the Thessalonians.

Paul speaks of two *means* (or concrete methods in time and space) by which the salvation of Christ had come to the Thessalonians: 1) they had received the “*sanctification*” of the Spirit, and 2) they had been “*called*” through the preaching of the gospel by Paul and his team. God had used the work of the Spirit *combined with* the preaching of the gospel to bring them to faith in his Son.

(b) What is “*sanctification by the Spirit*,” in this context? What are some ways that the Spirit *sanctifies* people so that they can come to be saved?

Sanctification is the doctrine of being “set apart” from something unto something else, a work of the Spirit whereby he “transforms” the elect from one condition to another. The word has its root in the word used for “saint”: a person *set aside* by virtue of (great) faith in Christ. Although typically used to describe the *post-conversion* process of the Spirit transforming a believer into greater and greater holiness through discipline, in this context, Paul uses the word as a description of *regeneration*. In this case, sanctification is used to mean the “setting apart” of the elect person to *hear* the gospel, the work of the Spirit to “mark out” an individual by his indwelling work to a new *born-again state* so that they hear the gospel *and respond*. This work includes all of what is necessary in the life of a reprobate man to come to faith: the change of heart within the man, the drawing of the man to a place where he can hear the gospel, the preaching of the gospel, and the effectual calling of the man to faith by such hearing (see 4a below).

(c) How is “*belief in the truth*” related to this *sanctification* by the Spirit? To what *truth* is Paul referring?

The work of the Spirit in regeneration (i.e., sanctification, in this context) is to give the man a heart now capable of *believing the truth*. Up until now (see the previous lesson), the reprobate man has lived *under the lie*: he has been given over to the delusion of his own immorality, hatred of God, and rejection of his Christ. Now, however, under the resurrecting power of the Spirit, such a man, *born again with a new heart*, desires to hear the truth *and to respond to it*. The truth of the *gospel* now “burns” within him; he hears of Christ, he understands and *believes* who Christ is and what he has done, recognizes his own *deep* sinfulness and worthiness of wrath, and *responds* by repenting of his sin (i.e., turning from the lie), trusting in Christ as his *sole source* of satisfaction before God.

4. (a) In v. 14a, what does it mean that the Spirit “*called*” them through the gospel? To *what* has the believer been called? How does this *call* come about in the life of the reprobate person?

For any man to truly come to Christ, the Spirit of God must *call him* to faith and repentance. This call is a *unique work* of the Spirit to “bring” the man to Christ, to give him what is necessary to respond in repentance and faith *and then to see him to the command inherent within the gospel*. This call is an *effectual call*, for it *accomplishes* the will of the Father in the heart and mind of the elect person. It is not simply an “invitation” to “accept” something; it is a *powerful drawing* of the man to Christ, such that the man now desires, *with every fiber of his being*, to respond appropriately to the gospel. This call is to *repentance of sin* (i.e., turning from the lie) to *faith in Christ* (i.e., a radical trust in the promises of God presented in the Person and work of Jesus Christ in his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the throne of heaven). It is a call *from the Spirit*, working from within the new heart, to lead a man to Christ.

(b) What does this calling *produce* (see v. 14b)? How do you understand the idea of believers obtaining “*the glory*” of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Paul says that this calling is so that the Thessalonian believers “*may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” The call of the Spirit is not just to “be saved”; it is a call that leads *all the way* to the finished purpose of God in his Son. Christ died not only to rescue the elect, but to accomplish the *fullness* of the Father’s purpose for them *in eternity*: that they might be conformed *fully* to the image of the Son, holy and blameless before the Father. The elect are chosen *to be a unique and special people*, those that will enjoy the perfect presence of God forever, and the calling of the Spirit is *to that end*. The work of regeneration is the *first step* towards a *complete* transformation of the believer, from reprobate rebel to fully sanctified saint, from hater of God to lover of God, from unholy worker of iniquity to holy, righteous son of God. This is the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ: his own nature as the perfect Son of God is the *goal* for the Christian: to share in his glory by virtue of following in his footsteps, raised from the dead (spiritually), transformed in this life from one state of holiness to another, and then perfected in glorification (physically) on the Day of the Lord.

5. (a) From v. 15, what do *you* think Paul means by the “*traditions*” that were taught to the Thessalonians by Paul and his friends? How does this *differ* from the “typical” traditions assumed in churches today?

In this context, the word “*traditions*” is undoubtedly referring to the various theological elements of the gospel that the Thessalonians had learned from Paul, and *probably* included the various rites associated with faith in Christ, such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These were things utterly *gospel-centered*: the importance of preaching and teaching, the celebration of baptism for new converts through that preaching, and the confirmation of faith in the completed work of Christ in Communion. In other words, a set of “traditions” that were utterly *Christ-centered*: his word and his ordinances to follow. This is *very different* from the “traditions” most often seen in churches, aspects of communal life that are typically *man-centered*: activities or “norms” of behavior expected within the church family that are designed by men as “additions” to the aspects listed above, including such things as imposed moralities, regularly scheduled programs and activities, forms of worship and liturgy, etc.

(b) In the same verse, what does Paul mean when he implores them to “*stand firm*?” Against what?

To “*stand firm*” is to *persevere* in the faith, especially in the face of opposition and persecution, *even if that opposition comes from within the church herself*. Paul desires for the Thessalonians to “*hold fast*” to the teachings he had left with them, as evidenced by the fact that they were greatly disturbed by a message regarding the return of the Lord. To *persevere* in faith is *another aspect* of the work of the Spirit, but one that the believer *participates* in. The Spirit, indwelling the believer, works to guide the believer towards holiness, and the believer must be willing to *submit himself* to this leading. The follower of Christ must *follow Christ*, as he is led to do so by the Spirit in sanctification. Thus, to “*stand firm*” is to hold fast to the truths *first believed* (i.e., the “*firstfruits*”) and to walk in *utter commitment* to those truths day by day.

(c) In his written prayer in vv. 16-17, what does Paul *ask for*, from God, for the Thessalonians?

Paul prays for “*comfort*” for the Thessalonians, a sense of *assurance* and “*good hope.*” This letter will remind them of the truths Paul had brought to them, especially that they had been called by God as his elect people, and that they would “sit back” and realize that nothing could separate them from God’s good purpose in them, *no matter when the Parousia might come!* Paul prays that this assurance would begin in their “*hearts*” (i.e., at their very core) and work its way out “*in every good work and word*”, that the Thessalonians would *live out* their faith in full assurance that God had given them hope, even in the face of trial and tribulation.