

Jeremiah says that Israel was holy to the LORD – the firstfruits of the harvest.

What does that mean?

Well, in the Law of Moses, the *firstfruits* of the harvest belonged to God.

The idea is that the whole harvest belongs to God –
so you give to God the first portion of the harvest
as a way of acknowledging *him*.

If you think about it for a moment –
this is an important – and difficult – thing to do!

It’s been a long winter.

In those days, you don’t have refrigerators –
you don’t have grocery stores that have fresh produce all winter!
So when the new harvest comes –
ooh! – you’ve got fresh fruit and veggies! (for a limited time only!)

So you reach out your hand to that fresh fruit –
ripe and juicy –

...

And you remember that your first father, Adam,
was drawn away from the truth by a tempting piece of fruit.

And so when you pluck the first of your harvest,
you don’t eat it!

You take it to the temple – to the sanctuary where God’s name dwells –
that replica of Eden (as we saw last time).

And you bring the firstfruits to the Lord –
as a token that all the harvest belongs to him!

And God warned that those who ate of the firstfruits
incurred guilt.

The firstfruits are *holy*.

If you eat something that belongs to God –
then you are claiming, in effect, to be God.

And so God says in verse 3 that “All who ate of it incurred guilt;
disaster came upon them, declares the LORD.”

We are no longer under the particular details of the Mosaic Law.

But the principle is still a useful one!

A paycheck doesn’t particularly remind us of the Garden of Eden!
But we are still just as tempted to use our money as though God isn’t there.

The principle of the firstfruits means that you should give to God
the *first part* of your increase.

The firstfruits was never about “how much” – it was about gratitude.

It was about putting God *first* in everyday life.

Even when you *really want* that juicy peach!

Recognizing that no – I should not be focused on *me* and *my desires* –
I need to devote the *first part* of all that I am and all that I have
to God.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 33 –

a song of praise for the steadfast love and faithfulness of God.

And for that reason, we sing it to the tune of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”!

Sing Psalm 33 (white folder)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2

Last time we heard Paul explain how the Man of Lawlessness will come before the end –
but also that between now and then the *mystery* of Lawlessness is already at work.

This is why every generation has thought that “this must be the end”!

Because we can always see the Mystery of Lawlessness at work –

and we can always see potential candidates for the Man of Lawlessness
rising up and putting themselves forward!

And we saw last time that there is one who restrains the Man of Lawlessness

(Revelation 12 tells us that this is the archangel Michael) –

so that the gospel may go forth with great power in the present age.

In one sense verses 9-12 are talking about the coming of the Lawless One –

and yet the principle can be equally applied to what happens now –

when only the *Mystery* of Lawlessness is at work.

The false signs and wonders that characterize the Man of Lawlessness

can be seen in lesser form even today.

We all can see around us that there are still *strong delusions* that lead people astray.

And for the evidence of that,

just consider how often people today take pleasure in unrighteousness.

Just consider how often *you* take pleasure in unrighteousness!

Every time I sin, I am believing a lie!

I am believing that somehow, if I do this thing that is wrong

it will make my life better – it will make me happier –

it will bring all sorts of good things into my life!

Is that true?

Does pornography, for example, make this world a better place?
Does it make you a happier, wiser, kinder person?
Does it bring joy and peace to those around you?

“To take pleasure in wickedness is... clear evidence that one disbelieves the truth.”
(Witherington, 225)

If you believe the truth, then you will take pleasure in *doing* the truth.

And Paul now goes on to explore this more in verses 13-17.

Introduction: You Are Brothers Beloved by the Lord (v13)

¹³ *But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord,*

Verses 13-14 are all one sentence in Greek.

And he starts the sentence the same way that he started the last section in 1:3 –

“We ought always to give thanks to God for you brothers, as is right...”

Now he reiterates the same point.

And by using the same phrase – he signals that he is bringing this section to an end.

Grammar is important!

Conjunctions and prepositions make all the difference in the world!

In verse 13 Paul says

“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...”

What if Paul had replaced the “because” with a “so that”:

We ought always to give thanks to God for you,
so that God might choose you as the firstfruits to be saved...?

That would mean the exact opposite of what Paul says here!

For Paul, the reason why we ought to give thanks to God

is *because* God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved.

The “so that” is found at the end of the sentence in verse 14 –

“so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We give thanks *because* of what God has done.

And the *purpose* of God’s call is that we may obtain the glory of Jesus.

1. Chosen as Firstfruits to Be Saved (v13)

- a. Through Sanctification by the Spirit**
- b. Through Belief in the Truth**

because God chose you as the firstfruits^[d] to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved.

As your footnote in the ESV says, some manuscripts say

“God chose you from the beginning.”

In Greek, “firstfruits” is *aparchen* and “from the beginning” is *ap arches*.

Paul teaches both things elsewhere – so either one would be entirely possible for Paul to say!

But given the context of 2 Thessalonians,

I think that the ESV has made the right decision here.

It is certainly true that God chose us “from the beginning”

(Paul says in Ephesians 1 that we were chosen in Christ
before the foundation of the world) –

but the focus in 2 Thessalonians 2 is more on the *end* rather than the *beginning*.

Paul’s point is that God chose you as the *firstfruits* to be saved.

The point of the firstfruits was that they be offered to God
as a reminder that all of the harvest belongs to God,
and so this is God’s own portion –
a portion that is *holy* to God.

And because the firstfruits are *holy to God* –

if anyone else eats them – they incur guilt.

In other words, don’t be afraid – God will protect you in the midst of the trials.

But in the broader sense, what God is doing is bringing salvation to all the earth.

And these Thessalonian Christians are just the tiny initial portion of the harvest.

The firstfruits are the *first* part of the harvest.

I want to remind you of how remarkable this is.

Because back in Paul’s day,

there were only a few tens of thousands of Christians.

The whole of the Christian church in all the world in Paul’s day
could fit into the Notre Dame football stadium.

Seriously.

If you were alive in the 1st century,

would you have believed that this itinerant Jewish preacher
was preaching the only true religion in the world?

There have been hundreds – dare I say thousands – of religions
that have sprung up with some new religious teaching.

But this one has continued to spread and grow –
until it has reached all the earth.

So God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved.

Now, you might wonder –

if the Thessalonians are firstfruits – what about me?

2,000 years later, we're not quite "first" anymore!

And in a very real way – that is true.

We are *not* the firstfruits in the same way that they were.

John Deliyannides was born in Thessalonika 1900 years

after Paul wrote his epistles to that city.

As we saw at the beginning of this series,

Paul writes to the "church of the Thessalonians" –

not just the church in Thessalonika –

because he wants them to see that they are the firstfruits in their city.

But when you look around South Bend – and Elkhart – and Niles –

you see clearly that we are still a firstfruits –

because there is still a long way to go until all the harvest is brought in!

But *how* did God choose you as firstfruits to be saved?

Paul focuses on two things:

through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth

What does "sanctification by the Spirit" mean?

To "sanctify" means to set apart – to consecrate – to make holy.

Think about the language of "firstfruits" that we just saw.

In Jeremiah 2 we heard about how "Israel was holy to the LORD –
the firstfruits of his harvest."

God had set Israel apart as holy.

And part of the point of being *holy*
is being protected by God.

Jeremiah 2:3 had said "all who ate of it"

(in other words, all who devoured Israel – who persecuted Israel)
"incurred guilt; disaster came upon them."

Here in 2 Thessalonians, Paul has just made this point in chapter 1, verse 6,
"since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction
those who afflict you" –

To be *holy* means to belong to God –

and if you mess with something that belongs to God,

you can expect that God will not be happy with you!!

We often think of sanctification in terms of how God changes us –

so that we are more and more made like Christ –

and that is certainly part of what sanctification means –

but the focus here is on how the Spirit of God

sets us apart as those who belong to God.

And the second part of this focuses on *belief in the truth*.

How is it that God saves us?

First is the work of the Spirit in sanctifying us – and setting us apart for God.
But also through belief in the truth.

Faith is the instrument through which we receive all the benefits of Christ.

I know that some of you – no, *most of you!* –

struggle with some aspect of the Christian message.

Are you really willing to *trust God* with *that area* of your life?

Pastor Joel has been working with our catechumens this summer.

When explaining what faith is,

he says, if you were in a burning building –

and the firefighters had a big net to catch you in –

and they said, “if you jump, we’ll save you!” –

what would you do?

Well, you might wonder, what if they’re not strong enough to catch me?

What if the net breaks?

What if there’s another way that’s a little easier?!!

And while you are debating whether to trust them or not,
the building burns down and you die.

That’s why Paul highlights the second thing that God uses to save us.

The first is sanctification by the Spirit –

the Spirit of God sets us apart as holy to God;

the second thing is belief in the truth.

We saw last week that the mystery of lawlessness is characterized by a refusal to love the truth.

Chapter 2, verse 10 –

those who are perishing refuse to love the truth and so be saved –

therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false

in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth

but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Believing the truth is not merely an intellectual thing.

You must also *love* the truth – and indeed, it is no less important to *do the truth*.

2. Called to Salvation (v14)

a. Through the Gospel

b. So that You May Obtain the Glory of Jesus

And...

¹⁴ *To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is still part of the same sentence as verse 13.

It might be better to say, “to which he called you through our gospel” –

to this – to what?

he called you to salvation – to being the firstfruits to be saved!

But how did that call come?

Through the gospel.

Through the good news that was preached to you.

As Paul says in Romans – “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ”

And notice who does the calling:

“to this *he called you*” –

God is the one who calls.

Paul did not call you – *I do not call you!*

Rather God calls you.

The call is what God himself does.

Of course, he uses means.

As Paul says, “he called you *through* our gospel.”

God’s call comes to you through the means of a human preacher.

But *I can’t* convince you of anything!

Only God can change the heart – can open the ears of the deaf,
the eyes of the blind.

But he uses *our gospel* – the good news that is preached.

The gospel is the good news of what Jesus has done.

The gospel is not a self-help message.

There were lots of philosophers in the ancient world

who would tell you how to live the good life!

The apostles came preaching a message of how God has come in the flesh – in Jesus.

Jesus has done what only God can do.

All through the OT, the coming Day of the LORD

was the day when God himself would come and make all things right.

But for Paul, the Day of the LORD is the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus does what only God can do.

He died for our sins –

he took the wrath and curse of God that was due to us for sin,

so that, in him, we might become the righteousness of God.

And you have been called to this salvation – through our gospel –
through the preaching of this good news –
so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let that sink in for a moment!

The point of salvation – the point of all this message –
is *so that* you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the central hope that Paul holds forth for you!
This is the purpose for why Jesus came –
for why Paul preaches –
why *I preach* today!

The whole point of God’s plan of redemption
is *so that* you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me ask you:

how important is it to *you* that you obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ?

I know –

it can be really easy to say “oh, that’s a long ways away –
I’m focused on my career – my family” –
or perhaps “I’m still in school” –

but you never know how long you have left!

And further, if Paul is right – that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work in our day –
then the idea that “I have time” may well be one of those “strong delusions”
that lead people to believe what is false!

And if Paul is right, then obtaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ
is what we should be focused on!

As Paul says in Philippians 3,

“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth
of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish,
in order that I may gain Christ,
and be found in him,

not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,
but that which comes through faith in Christ,

the righteousness from God that depends on faith –

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection,
and may share his sufferings,

becoming like him in his death,
that by any means possible
I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (3:8-11)

How we live in this life must always be oriented towards *that* end.
What you do today will always be driven by your *hope*.

(Paul speaks of that “good hope” here in verse 16).

What is it that you *hope* for?
Because what you hope for is what will drive you in life.

If your hope is that you might attain the resurrection from the dead –
that will affect the way you do *everything else!*

If your hope is that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that will change the way you live here and now.

And that’s Paul’s point in the “so then” of verse 15:

3. So Then, Stand Firm and Hold on to the Apostles’ Teaching (v15)

¹⁵ *So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.*

It’s so easy to believe lies!

How do we avoid slipping into the trap of the enemy?
We start by standing firm and holding on to the traditions that the apostles’ taught us.
The apostles’ teaching is the standard by which we must live.

Roman Catholics like to use this verse to say that there is an authoritative *oral tradition* alongside the Bible.

And *in a sense* they are right.

It is important for us to recognize that the *canon* –
the *standard* for faith and practice –
is the apostles’ teaching.

The question is *how do we know what the apostles’ teaching is?*

When Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians,
the *standard* which he holds them to is the “traditions that you were taught by us,
either by our spoken word or by our letter.”

The apostolic teaching *is* the standard for the church.

So Paul says that the apostles’ teaching is the standard for the church.

But Paul *never says* that anyone else – besides the apostles –
has the same authority!

Indeed, the reason why the early church spent so much time

working through the question of which books were canonical
was precisely because *they thought* that the apostles' teaching
was *the standard!*

No one in the early church ever suggested
that there was some sort of continuing “magisterium”
that had divine authority to pronounce what is canon –
what is the “standard.”

Sure, for several generations after the apostles,
you occasionally have people appealing to what the apostles taught orally,
but once the apostles are dead,
how do you resolve a dispute about what is authentic?

You have to go back to what is indisputably apostolic!
If you can prove that the apostles' taught something,
then I will believe it.

Because the apostolic teaching *is* the standard for the church of Jesus Christ!
And so you are to stand firm (in whatever trials come your way)
and hold to the traditions that the apostles have taught us.

And so Paul prays for you –
or perhaps better, he *blesses you*:

**Benediction: The Comfort that Establishes Your Hearts in Every Good Work and Word
(v16-17)**

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us
eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every
good work and word.

Remember that Paul is writing to a church that is experiencing affliction and persecution.
But Paul insists that suffering and affliction should not be our chief focus.
Rather, it is that *good hope* – (or as he said in 1:12,
“so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you,
and you in him,
according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
When your eyes are fixed on Jesus –
when your hope is firmly grounded in the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting –
that totally transforms the sufferings of this age!

Because God the Father loved you –
Our Lord Jesus – and God our Father –
gave you eternal comfort and good hope through grace.

Eternal comfort.

This is no temporary “just make it feel better”!

This is a comfort that lasts *forever*.
This is a comfort that wipes away every tear –
that heals every disease –
that rights every wrong!
(This is also why *eternal* comfort is entirely consistent with *vengeance* –
as we saw in chapter 1 –
because *righting every wrong*
must include bringing justice against those who have afflicted you!)

But notice where Paul goes with this in verse 17!

Our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father – who loved us –
who gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace –
may he *comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word*.

When your hearts are properly oriented toward Christ –
when your hope is properly set on the eternal comfort –
on the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting –
that has *profound consequences* for everyday life *right now!*

And this comes about in two ways:

First, “may he comfort your hearts” –
if you *know* that in the Day of the Lord,
our Lord Jesus *will* make every thing right –
then you can live *now* with that comfort.
You don’t have to worry about whether everything is going right *right now* –
because you know that Jesus will take care of it!

Sure, I look around at the church today –
I look at *myself* today! –
and it would be easy to get discouraged and afraid!

What a mess!

I can sympathize with the doomsayer who told us when we were newlyweds
that we shouldn’t have any children,
because it would be irresponsible to bring children into this messed up world!

May he comfort your hearts!
Don’t worry!
Jesus is king – and he will accomplish his purposes –
in spite of our mess – and even *through* our mess!

So, truly, *may he comfort your hearts!*

Because that leads to the second consequence for everyday life.
When your hope is set on obtaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ,

then he also *establishes* your heart *in every good work and word*.

We were called in verse 15 to stand firm.

But now in verse 17, Paul assures us that our Lord Jesus Christ himself
and God our Father will establish your hearts in every good work and word.

When your hope is fixed on Jesus,
then it is much easier to do and to say that which is right and pleasing to him!
Because again – where your hope is
will determine what you think is important!

Now, in case you think that Paul is encouraging people to sit around,
twiddling their thumbs, waiting for Jesus to show up,
just look at 3:12 –

“Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ
to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

Paul still urges you to go about doing all the ordinary things of life.
But when your *hope* is set on the Lord Jesus – and his glorious appearing –
when you seek first *his kingdom* and *his righteousness* –
then he establishes your hearts in every good work and word.

And yes, Paul is all in favor of “good works”!

Good works are precisely that: they are *good!*

You can't use them to *earn* God's favor –

but that's because God *already* loved you! (just look at verse 16!)

Good works and good words are what flow out of a heart that is established
in the eternal comfort and good hope that is ours in Christ Jesus!