

Chosen by God

And the Means of Salvation

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5a

That Most Pugnacious of Doctrines

MANY YEARS AGO SOMEONE wrote the following paragraph that I have returned to in my thoughts time and time again:

Can controversial teachings nurture Christlikeness? Before you answer this question, ask another one: Are there any

significant biblical teachings that have not been controversial? I cannot think of even one, let alone the number we all need for the daily nurture of faith. If this is true, then we have no choice but to seek our food in the markets of controversy. We need not stay there. We can go home and feast if the day has been well spent. But we must buy there. As much as we would like it, we do not have the luxury of living in a world where the most nourishing truths are unopposed. If we think we can suspend judgment on all that is controversial and feed our souls only on what is left, we are living in a dreamworld. There is nothing left. The reason any of us thinks that we can stand alone on truths that are noncontroversial is because we do not know our history or the diversity of the professing church. Besides that, would we really want to give to the devil the right to determine our spiritual menu by refusing to eat any teaching over which he can cause controversy?

He concludes, “The teaching of Scripture on election has been controversial. But I believe with all my heart that it is precious beyond words and a great nourishment for the Christlikeness of faith.”¹

¹ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God*, Rev. and expanded. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), 120–122.

That person was John Piper, a man who more than any other pastor was the human means by which the Lord brought me into Reformed Theology. I've been dining at this table ever since, though I love inviting those who do not ordinarily eat here to join me for dinner. In many ways, I've found the food at this table spiritually delicious and satisfying. But I did not grow up Reformed, though I did grow up broadly Evangelical and was a Christian from early on. So permit me to tell you a little of my story.

It was in the same building we are worshiping in today that about 30 years ago a [Sunday School](#) teacher was teaching a class on Freewill and Predestination. I found it very interesting, and the way he taught it was pretty standard for that group. [Present both sides](#) by giving verses that prove predestination and that prove freewill. [Present them as if both are true](#). And most important, [don't tell anyone what you think](#).

That class left me intrigued, if not totally confused. It really made no sense. What would it mean that both predestination and not predestination were true (in those days I understood "freewill" to mean the opposite of predestination, because that's how they taught it). It wasn't until I went off

to (at the time) Bethel College, that I would be challenged with it again. This time, it was a guy in my freshman dorm. He knew going in that he wanted to become a pastor, and he is still doing it to this day. I quickly found out that he was a strong Dispensationalist, which caused us to bond, as that's something I had been studying a lot at that time. But he was also a Calvinist. I knew from that earlier class that Calvinists are those who teach only the predestination side of the coin.

This led to a lot of discussions. For me, it led to a lot of internal and external strife. Strife with my friends. Strife with my family. I can't help but laugh when I hear R. C. Sproul describe it:

Arguing about predestination is virtually irresistible. (Pardon the pun.) The topic is so juicy. It provides an opportunity to spar about all things philosophical. When the issue flares up we suddenly become super-patriotic, guarding the tree of human liberty with more zeal and tenacity than Patrick Henry ever dreamed of. The specter of an all-powerful God making choices for us, and perhaps even against us, makes us scream, "Give me free will or give me death!"²

² R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 9.

This is a pugnacious doctrine with many people, because it fights at us—at our natural innate human self-reliance, importance, and goodness. My friend kept insisting that predestination was true and that freewill as I had understood it was not. He kept telling me to read my Bible, not to believe him. I decided the only way I could ever make up my mind was to do what he said. I spent the next three years reading and rereading every word. After many heated discussions, some of which I'm not proud of, I had to conclude that he was right. Rather, I think that's when I finally admitted it, as I think I knew it all along.

As for Piper, very early in this process, someone gave me his first book (which had just come out at the time) called *Desiring God*. It took me a while to read it, but when I did, I discovered that he was a Calvinist (he had taught at Bethel just a few years prior to this and went off to pastor Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Bethel is in St. Paul). I decided to start attending this church, even though most of my other friends were going to more “upbeat” places. This is why Piper was so influential on me. Now, after learning a lot more, here I still am.

Introductions

It's hard to say if the Thessalonian Christians were once anything like me in the way they thought about this topic. I'm certain they did think about it, even before the Apostle came to their city. For the Greek philosophers had been discussing it in those days, taking all the sides that we still see argued today.³ Whether they had confusion about it like I did or not, it is certain that once Paul came to them, he did talk about it with them. And it seems even more than this was one of the churches that had no problem receiving it as he taught it. Indeed, he begins his first letter to them with this idea. As such, and since it is such a foundational doctrine to understanding God, ourselves, and salvation, we will spend the majority of our time on it today.

We will do it by looking at [the blessings of election](#) (grace and peace, faith and love and hope and conviction), [what to do with those blessings](#) (thank God and pray), [the object of election](#) (Jesus), [the means of salvation](#) (word of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit), all which begin in

³ "Freewill in Antiquity," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_will_in_antiquity.

eternity past in the loving and choosing purposes of God in election.

First, let's get our bearings. Our letter begins, “**Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy...**” (**1Th 1:1**). Who are these men? **Paul** is author or co-author of at least 13 New Testament letters.⁴ He was a highly trained Jewish scholar. He was a pupil of R. Gamaliel, a 1st century leading member of the Sanhedrin, himself the grandson of the famous Hillel, “**one of the most important figures in Jewish history**” (*wiki*). You will remember that Paul was first named **Saul**, that he viewed himself as a blameless keeper of God's law, a zealous Pharisee, a Hebrew of Hebrews from the least of the tribes—Benjamin (**Php 3:5-6**). This was his view of himself as he, Saul, was sitting there applauding if not also participating in the stoning of the heretic **Stephen** who dared to speak blasphemy by claiming that Jesus was God in the flesh. This was his view of himself as he was on the road to Damascus about to carry out God's will to murder more Christians for their defiance

⁴ Paul: Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus. Paul and Sosthenes: 1 Corinthians. Paul and Timothy: 2 Corinthians, Colossians, Philemon. Paul, Timothy, and the overseers and deacons: Philippians. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy: 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

of the same. But once converted, he became greatest missionary in history, suffering for the faith, put to death sometime before 70 AD.

Timothy converted under Paul's ministry in Lystra. His mother was Jewish; his father was Greek. Because of this, he would have been considered a Jew, at least until he became a Christian. He was raised on the Holy Scriptures (the OT) by his Mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois who had both converted to Christianity. Even though raised this way, he was only later **baptized** when he "made the good confession" before many witnesses. He then followed a desire and calling to ministry. He went with Paul to the mission field where he suffered in jail and other nasty things. Paul would send Timothy to Thessalonica in his absence, since it was not safe for him to return. Timothy returns with news about them which occasioned these letters. Later, he would become pastor at Ephesus. He died near the turn of the century.

Silvanus is probably the Latin name of **Silas**, who plays prominently in Acts. He was chosen by the Jerusalem elders to accompany Barnabas and Paul to Antioch, as he was apparently a prominent member of the church in Jerusalem.

After Paul and Barnabas split over their disagreement about what to do with Mark, Silas replaced Barnabas and went on the second missionary journey, where he was there with Paul and Timothy in Thessalonica when terrible persecution broke out against them. After they sent Paul away, Silas and Timothy stayed behind, later rejoining him in Corinth, from where this letter was probably written. A bold and courageous man who risked his life for the gospel, we know little about him after this.

Having heard Timothy's report about the church, the three men sit down and write our letters. They begin with a **greeting**. "To the church of the Thessalonians." (1Th 1:1). Like most of Paul's letters, this is written to **one church**. It is a Christian church who believed in the Father and Son. "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This fundamental doctrine of **the Trinity** is thus the first thing we learn theologically from the book. Though not expanded upon or yet adding the Spirit (which he will soon enough), you can see here the equal importance of the Two.

God is the Father. This is the way Jesus himself taught us to pray to God, calling him Father. The Father is often

just called “God” in the NT, especially when that word and “Jesus” is paired with it.

As for **Jesus**, he is here given a royal title—Lord Jesus Christ. “**Lord**” means not merely that he is a master or teacher, certainly not president or best friend, but that he is the king. This is why the charge that almost got Paul killed in this city was as we saw last time, a rival emperor a king, a Jew from far away in Israel who demanded the allegiance of these people way up north in Greece! “**Jesus**” is his birth name. “Joshua” in Hebrew, this is his human name. “**Christ**” is his divine title—Messiah. He is the Deliverer long expected who fulfills all things in his coming. This Son therefore stands beside his Father in heaven as the God who creates his church out of unlikely people as far away as Thessalonica.

That Most Comforting of Doctrines

Two Blessings of Election

The last part of the greeting takes us to two of **the blessings of election**: “**Grace to you and peace**” (1:1). “**Grace**” is

having favor with God. When you were his enemy, Christ died for you. When you trusted in him, God showed you grace, favor. Grace can have non-saving (common grace) and saving (special grace) components. That is, God shows grace to all people generally, but a special grace to some in salvation. It's the same grace, but it is given in different amounts for different benefits and purposes. The context of the introduction of 1 Thessalonians is quite obviously saving grace, as we will soon see. “Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...” We live in such a graceless age, which demonstrates one thing: God's saving grace is far away from most people. It was the same in those days, which is why as we will soon see, Paul is so thankful for these Christians.

“Peace” is both the absence of hostility with God and the presence of God's blessing. It involves God not being hostile towards you if you are at peace with him, but it includes a wonderful relationship between God and those who were once hostile to him because they have been reconciled to him through the death of his Son through faith. Many people say they want this, but do they want it badly enough to seek it through the Lord Jesus Christ?

Context of Election

What I want you to notice here is how it is these **positive, alluring, fragrant doctrines** that begin this letter. Unlike something like Galatians where the greeting seems almost done out of cultural necessity as it quickly turns into a severe warning, there is none of that here. There people are not in need of warning, but **comfort**.

This is **the context into which the doctrine of election** is presented here at the beginning of this Epistle. We will soon enough learn why they need comfort, as the theme suffering for Christ begins around **vv. 5-6**. But today, I want you to see what I've come to see. That there is one doctrine above all others that God gives to his people to cheer and to comfort them. Election.

When looked at as a whole (**vv. 2-5a**), the doctrine of election takes up the end of this greeting (or *exordium*).⁵ As

⁵ An *exordium* is a part of Greek that rhetoric foreshadows the purpose of the letter while making the audience “**well-disposed, attentive, and tractable**” toward the communicator. It leads quickly to the *narratio*, the main discussion. Part of the problem here is that no one knows quite were to break the *exordium* with the *narratio* in this letter. Witherington comments, “**The *exordium* flows naturally into the *narratio* which is why some have had difficulty in discerning where one stops and the other starts.**” He has the break at **vs. 3**. (I believe he does this in part, at least subconsciously, because as an Arminian he wants to put election out of the *exordium*). Others put it at **vs. 10** (Wanamaker) or, as I do, at **vs. 5** (the pioneer of this field Jewett). Witherington admits that vv. 4-5 “**could be seen as the conclusion of a Greek sentence which began in vs. 2.**”

such, it becomes the climax of the introduction. Put into the context of the other doctrines here, it is surrounded by **gospel** and **love** and **faith** and **peace** and **grace** and the **power** of God to save.

The words here are not judgment and wrath and justice and the like. That is unlike how the doctrine was presented to me in my youth. That is how almost everyone wants to contextualize this doctrine today. Rather than the positive context of a rich and joyful salvation, it was always more of a doctrine to simply fight about among Christians. And while debate appeals to my carnal side, I'm just not sure that's the main reason why it's in the Bible. No, instead, people who are going through the ringer because of their faith are often prone to sadness, doubts, questioning God's goodwill towards them, and other such things. Election is the foundational doctrine to stop these things in a Christian's life—if you know how to use it properly. If you don't, if you have had it taught to you in an abusive way, it can lead to no

See **Ben Witherington III**, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 52; **Charles A. Wanamaker**, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 73; **Robert Jewett**, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*. Foundations and Facets (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 68-78.

point of these first verses is to

end of introspection that ranges from unhealthy to dangerous. No. God gives you this doctrine for your comfort. It is an extremely comforting doctrine for God's saints.

Election to Salvation

Since it is foundational, let's begin at the ending, with election itself. Then we will move to its effects and object and means. **The idea of election** is easy to understand, especially in a democratic society. Someone "elects" someone else to something. The person being elected may "want" to be elected. For example, in the mid-term elections this week, **two candidates** both *want* to be the governor of Colorado. But their willing it does not make it so. The people must vote one or the other into office. Their election takes place outside of themselves (though, obviously, in politics they do all they can to affect the outcome of the election through advertisements, rallies, and so forth).

This is how it is with God and people, except that unlike a political candidate, the person here can do nothing to manipulate God's choice. In fact, as we will see, his choice is before they are even born. This is perhaps the fundamental

reason why some do not like individual election, and even deny that it is biblical.

This is something a lot of Calvinists need to hear about classic Arminians. They do not deny *the concept* of election in the Bible. They deny that it ever refers *to individuals being chosen for salvation*. A good representative is a professor at Denver Seminary. “When the writers write of God’s ‘election’ of individuals or mention certain people as ‘elect,’ they refer to God’s selection of these persons to specific tasks, roles, or functions in accomplishing his plans and purposes ... to God’s choice of his people as a body ... that is, election is a corporate designation.”⁶ So far, there is no problem, though many who are Reformed have not grappled enough with the fact that yes, God does predestine people to tasks and roles and that there is, of course, a corporate sense of predestination [i.e. God chose the nation of Israel, but not everyone in that nation was eternally saved]. The problem comes when he adds, “... [and] solely to God’s choice of a *corporate* body ... and not to God’s pre-temporal selection of

⁶ William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People*, Revised (Eugene, OF: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 266-67.

the specific *individuals* who will comprise that body” [italics original, underline mine].⁷

The Arminians (and Wesleyans) present us with a false choice. Why does it have to be election to individual salvation or election to something that isn't salvific? The only honest answer I know of is that people simply don't like the first idea. It can be for all kinds of reasons, of course. It might make them mad. They might think that something like prevenient grace is now given to totally depraved humans that allows them all to make a choice for something they actually despise prior to being given new birth. Many have convinced themselves that the Bible in fact never teaches individual salvation by election.

Our final appeal must be to the Scripture. This text is clear. Vs. 4-5a, “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”⁸ Vs. 4 gives us the “what.” Vs. 5a gives us

⁷ Witherington, speaking as a Wesleyan says the same thing, “Election for Paul is corporate. It was in ethnic Israel and is now “in Christ.”⁹ Paul carries over concepts of corporate election from early Judaism into his theologizing about the Christian assembly.” (65).

⁸ This is where I divide the end of the introduction from the beginning of the letter proper (even though it is in the middle of a verse, which is, of course uninspired and made up totally by men). For from here Paul changes subjects to suffering and persecution. In other words, this is the grounding of that new topic. See n. 5.

the “why.” First, the “what.” “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you...” (1Th 1:4). “Chosen” is the word *ekloge*. It means exactly what you think it means: “A choosing out, selection, election” (Friberg Lexicon). “To make a special choice based upon significant preference, often implying a strongly favorable attitude toward what is chosen ... ‘This is my Son, whom I have chosen’ (Lk 9:35)” (Louw-Nida).

Another Blessing of Salvation

This favorable attitude (from which mercy and grace spring) is seen here in the word “love” (*agapao*). This is a third blessing, on top of grace and peace. Love is such an unexpected and unsurpassable blessing. God set his love upon these people which is demonstrated in the fact that he has chosen them. To be loved by God and to know that you are loved by God, is there anymore more important?

Now here’s the thing. There is a sense in which God loves everyone. We are to love our enemies because God loves his enemies (Matt 5:43-45). Our love of enemies emulates his love for the same people. I refuse to minimize this

love of God, mostly because the Bible teaches this, but partly because I know that those who reject God's special love for his children do so in part as a reaction against a denial of his general love for everyone.

But those who refuse to believe in God's special love for his children set upon them in eternity past through election do so at the expense of many Scriptures, including ours here. This "love" comes through election. It is election to be saved into the family of God **Beale** writes about these "brothers loved by God,"

[This] shows that Christians are part of a family with God as their Father (see 1:1). Family members resemble one another, especially children their parents. One of the telltale signs that children are members of a family is that they have physical features resembling those of their parents. In addition, children often mimic their parents' habits and character traits. Brothers and sisters also resemble one another in the same ways. It is no different in the family of faith. If we really are part of God's family, then we will reflect God's love. We will be like Jesus, the Son of God, the perfect model of faith, love and hope when he lived on this earth. We will be

like other Christian brothers and sisters who reflect these godly qualities.⁹

But this electing love has even more of a context. This election itself is proven “**because**” of something. This is very important. “**He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.**” This is the “why” of election. To put it another way, this is the proof that God chose these people. And it is proof of individual election to salvation.

The Means of Election

The proof is that the gospel **had saved them**. This is couched in terms of “**means**.” That is, God doesn’t just zap a guy magically from death to life, from enmity to reconciliation, from hell to heaven, while he is in the jungles of Brazil having never heard of a Christ, while he is busy putting the poison of a dart frog on his blow dart to kill his rival

⁹ G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 52–53.

enemy simple because he is “elect.” That doesn’t happen. Ever. God uses means to do it. Ordinary, common, means.

These means **begin with the word**. “Our gospel came to you not only in word” (1Th 1:5). This implies that it came *at least* in word. It was not less than the word coming to them. The jungle running savage did not suddenly have an epiphany of Jesus and get saved with no missionary to be found. God sends the word. “The Lord gave the Word. Great was the company of the preachers” (Ps 68:11). There must be an announcement of the good news:

That Jesus Christ is born this day and has come to set the prisoners free.

That Jesus Christ had died this day offering up for them a plea.

That Jesus Christ was raised this day, after not one day, not two, but three.

That Jesus Christ ascended this day, and by God’s great decree
Is at the Right Hand of God,
Lord of heaven and earth, of Satan, of you, of me.

The proof of their election is beyond this however. Because it came to them in **power** and in **the Holy Spirit** (1Th 1:5). This “power” may have been some external sign that

often accompanied Paul's preaching.¹⁰ Or it could be translated as something like, the gospel came to you not only "in power, that is in the Holy Spirit,"¹¹ where the conviction that comes by the Holy Spirit is itself the Power.

Then, their conversion is some kind of "full conviction." This conviction could be of their sins, of Christ's lordship and deity, or their own assurance of faith. Frankly, there is no need to choose between these friends. All are probable. But it is the power and the Holy Spirit that brought it, and this proves that they are elect.

Now ask yourself a question. Assume for a moment that salvation is never to individual salvation. There are people who take this view of this very text. What sense does it make that the proof of election is found in the conversion of these people, if their conversion is actually up to their own good choice which is wholly independent of God's choice? That

¹⁰ Gal 3:5; Rom 15:18ff, 2Co 12:12 ff. See Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 79.

¹¹ This would be an exegetical *kai* ("and"). Aune demonstrates this possibility with *kai* in Rev 2:3 which closely parallels 1Th 2:3 and which Beale says parallels in its triad the triad of 1:5. Raymond Collins explicitly calls it "a classic Pauline hendiadys ... in which the exegetical 'and power' identifies 'the spirit' as the powerful Spirit of God." Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina Vol. 7, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 120; David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, vol. 52A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 142-43; G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 51.

would be like saying, “We are thankful, brothers, that God has chosen you, which is proven by the way you chose him totally apart from him choosing you.”

I said that some still take this as corporate election, not individual election. Arminians will reply that the “choosing” here is **the means**, not the ends. For example, one writes that God has chosen converts to be saved “**in a certain way.**” That way is “**‘through sanctification’ and ‘through trust.’**”¹² Fine. God chose the means by which someone would be saved (i.e. the gospel and faith). I agree. But the insistence is that he didn’t actually choose any individuals to actually convert.

But that’s the very flaw according to this passage. Paul says that it is **their conversion** which is the demonstration of their election. Again, conversion here is described as 1. The power of the Holy Spirit and 2. Full conviction (which implies both of their sin and of the truth that Jesus is Lord). In other words, these things came upon *these* people when the Gospel was proclaimed. But it didn’t come upon the entire

¹² Witherington (on 2Th 2:13), 232.

town, just these Christians, even though many more heard the same message.¹³

In this way of thinking, Paul could just as easily say to the rest of the city who started throwing rocks at him that God's electing love for them was proven in the fact that they didn't convert, because God still elected the means by which they could be saved had they so chosen of their own freewill! Oh, and by the way, he would also have to thank those people, as he does these Christians. That makes absolutely no sense. To praise a bunch of God haters who were trying to kill him that they are elect which is proven by the fact that God chose the means by which they would be saved? People truly go to amazing lengths to suppress the obvious truth of what these texts say. And this text says clearly that they are loved by God, chosen, because they have been converted by the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹³ In trying to be as fair to Witherington as I can be, he makes the still inexplicable blunder in my estimation by saying like a good Calvinist that *ekloge* “refers rather to conversion here as the next line makes clear” (64). For the life of me, I don't understand how this sentence does not undermine his entire argument. I know that he argues that “conversion” here is not knowable towards individuals, only the group as a whole (i.e. someone here has certainly converted). And as a Wesleyan, he thinks they can lose this salvation and that Paul could not know for certain if any individual had actually been converted. Still, I don't see how this line doesn't undermine his argument, for he seems to in fact be saying that they are being “chosen” for “conversion.” What does this even mean in a non-Calvinist sense?

More Blessings of Election

We've looked at three blessings of election already: grace and peace and love. Now I want to look draw more out in a direct way. The first we will see by comparing what we've just seen to a [parallel text](#) found in [2 Thessalonians](#). It says, "But 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" ([2Th 2:13](#)). The two passages are almost exactly the same.¹⁴ As such, they should help interpret one another. If the first is clearly talking about being converted, the second probably does too. I want you to think of [salvation itself](#) as a blessing of election. Election by itself is not salvation; it is the guarantee of salvation in eternity past. Salvation is a blessing that comes from election.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-5a	2 Thessalonians 2:13
We give thanks to God always for all of you...	But we ought always to give thanks to God for you,
brothers loved by God,	brothers beloved by the Lord,
that he has chosen you,	because God chose you

¹⁴ Witherington admits, "V. 13 is nearly identical with 1:3. Reduplication is a regular rhetorical device meant to reinforce certain truths."

because our gospel came to you not only in word,	as the firstfruits to be saved or from the beginning for salvation (see below)
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.	through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth

I've given the ESV translation. There is an interesting textual variant found in the middle of the verse. Where the ESV reads, "as the firstfruits to be saved," all older translations have "from the beginning for salvation." Let's hear those two side by side. "God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved." "God chose you from the beginning for salvation." Obviously, those are quite different.

Why the difference? It happened most likely because the original Greek manuscripts do not use separation of words, accents, or breathing marks.¹⁵ Some manuscripts read *aparchen* (firstfruits) and others *ap arches* (the beginning). Basically, the difference is a space between the second and third letters and the change of an *ν* to an *ς* at the end of the word.

aparchen
ap arches

¹⁵ Witherington, 231 n. 3.

Scholars debate which is original. Calvin was aware of the problem, and says, “Should any one prefer *first-fruits*, the meaning will be, that believers have been, as it were, set aside for a sacred offering, by a metaphor taken from the ancient custom of the law.” But he adds, “I have in preference followed [the generally received reading] that he says that the Thessalonians were *chosen from the beginning*.”¹⁶ This, it seems to me, makes the most sense with the parallel in our passage today.

The point is, what a glorious truth to know that when you are saved, it is because God’s power and the Holy Spirit have come upon you, that the Word becomes living and active inside of you by the Spirit who converts you, convicts you, and brings you assurance. In fact, this very point as the proof of God’s electing love has been a treasure to millions of Christians throughout the ages. Frankly, given my own sinful depravity, it has been a comforting balm beyond most others. Because if left to myself, I would not choose God. But the fact that I believe in him is itself the proof that he

¹⁶ John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 342.

loves me and has chosen me, for it is his work, his will, his choice of me that has saved me from myself. As Calvin also notes, that this explains “the reason why all are not involved and swallowed up in the same ruin—because Satan has no power over any that God has chosen, so as to prevent them from being saved, though heaven and earth were to be confounded.”¹⁷ God be praised!

Three more blessings of salvation are found in vs. 3. These are things that come after salvation has been granted. They are “your work of faith,” “labor of love,” and “steadfastness of hope.” The best way to summarize these is, I think, that God sanctifies those whom he predestines and calls through the Gospel. That is, he does not leave you to yourself after he saves you, he grants faith.

Ephesians 2:8 tells you that faith is the gift of God (along with grace). Philippians 1:29 that belief is “granted to you for the sake of Christ.” Acts 13:48 says that “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” These passages and others tell you that the confidence you have in things unseen (as Hebrews 11 puts it) is a gift from God. We do not naturally

¹⁷ John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 341.

believe things that seem foolish to us, or which make us angry, or which we cannot verify scientifically. This is how God appears to the natural mind, even the smartest among us. Therefore, to have faith in him is one of the great gifts he bestows upon his elect, for it is through this that the blind see.

Here, “faith” is “[the work of faith](#).” This seems to move us in the direction of the next blessing which is the “[labor of love](#).” Notice, “work” and “labor.” In other words, faith is working! It works through love. Love does something outside of itself. Love is an action, not a feeling. It is doing to others what you would have them do to you. It is treating others with dignity, putting them before yourself. Because God did this for you. Paul calls this out for many reasons, as we will see as we get deeper into these letters.

Finally, you have the “[steadfast hope](#),” which is also parallel to “work” and “labor.” In this way, we move back to something internal. It is often a great work and labor that takes steadfast commitment to continue believing and hoping in the promises. Especially when outwardly everything is falling apart. Hope itself is thus another blessing of election.

The Source of Election

This hope is directed at a source. “Our God and Father” (1Th 1:3), and “our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:4), and “the Holy Spirit” (1:5). Father, Son, Spirit. The full Trinity is in fact here. And what we are seeing now is that the Source of election—the Triune God—is also the direction of our hope. Hope and faith are directed at him, at his promises, at his words. Faith is placed in these things. God is the object of your belief. Not man. Not woman. Not politics. Not things. God alone.

What To Do In Light of Election?

What the Apostle is doing here is praising the Thessalonians for their steadfast commitment to the Triune God. It is here that I want to end. For the way the greeting is really formally introduced to us is in vs. 3, which explains what the proper response is to the doctrine of election. Earlier I hinted that many people get angry at this doctrine. This is the exact wrong response.

The godly response is two-fold. “We give thanks to God always for you” (1Th 1:3). Praise. He gives thanks to God for them. Why? Because they chose God? No. Because they weren’t saved, but God chose the means of salvation? No. Because God in his love grace and peace chose them, saved them, and is sanctifying them. The first reaction to election must be praise.

Many people do not know why they should praise God for election. It seems unfair to them. “Why wouldn’t God choose everyone?” This is the wrong question. The right question is, “Why would God choose anyone?” This is the question that actually understands its own depravity. The former question presupposes that people deserve it. The latter that they do not. Election is needed because people do not deserve salvation, are not seeking God, and are full of sinful rebellion against him. Given this condition, election is most praiseworthy. Especially when he proves himself by saving and sanctifying these same people.

The second response is prayer. “... constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith...” (2-3). Again, many people do not see a reason to pray if God predestines. The two seem

incompatible to them. This is a failure at the basic level of not understanding that **God predestines means**, that God has **given humans the capacity to have a relationship** with him, and that **God has made us responsible** creatures. Any or all of these misunderstandings undermine prayer when election is discussed. For Paul, it was the opposite. Because God predestined their salvation, he knows that his prayers will be heard for their continued need for his grace, peace, faith, love, and hope. He knows that when he prays for God to remember *them*, because of what he has already proven, that he will hear and answer!

Thus, I must ask you. Have you come to understand this doctrine as Scripture teaches it? When you hear about it, does it cause you **to praise or to curse**. Does it make you retreat to your **prayer closet or forget to talk** to God at all? Do you understand **why it is necessary**? If so, then you have begun to understand the depths of your own depravity before a holy God and you can begin praising and praying about your own soul and those of people you know who have been saved by God, that he would not leave you or forsake you, that he would shower his lovingkindness upon you, that he would continue to grant you grace and peace and faith and

hope and love. And you can be assured that he will do so, because he has called you to himself through the gospel of Jesus Christ. If not, then know he is calling you even now to turn to the only living God. His word has gone out. It will not return void. May the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of Jesus Christ and the glory of God the Father be pleased to save and to sanctify each person who hears his word.