

**Eternal Encouragement  
and Good Hope**  
*2 Thessalonians 2:13-17*

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## Eternal Encouragement and Good Hope

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. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 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. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. (2 Thess 2:13-17)

These are marvellous words of encouragement from Paul to the church of the Thessalonians. Those dear believers are long since in glory, and I am sure they wouldn't mind if we allowed ourselves also to be encouraged by these words. If you look at them carefully, you will see they are formed of three special parts:

1. Exaltation and thanksgiving to God for the past (vv. 13-14)
2. Exhortation to continue in the present (v. 15)
3. Expectation of what God will do in the future (vv. 16-17)

Two verses of thanksgiving to God for what he has done, one verse about what we are to do, two more verses of prayer for what God shall yet do for us. That sounds to me a very sensible proportion. Do bear it in mind if you're going to exhort folks—first give thanks for what they are and what they've done. Paul doesn't talk much about what *they* have done; he says he ought to give thanks to God for them for what *God* has done.

### 1. What has God done for them and for us?

Let's look at this lovely list in verses 13 and 14.

*'Beloved by the Lord'*

The word *beloved* is in the perfect tense—not merely loved now, but God *has loved* you, or God has set his love on you. 'Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, if with his love he befriend you.'<sup>1</sup> 'I give thanks in my heart for you, my brothers and sisters, when I think of this glorious thing,' says Paul. 'God has loved you and he loves you still.'

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Neander, 1680, 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty'.

*'God chose you'*

You are not believers by accident, you know. You didn't have to pester God to take you in, and he regretfully or reluctantly accepted you. No, God positively chose you.

Here some manuscripts say, 'God chose you from the beginning,' and that of course is true. Ephesians 1:4 tells us he has 'chosen us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world.' Therefore his choice is not affected by the ups and downs and the changing circumstances of life. His choice doesn't depend on that. He chose us before the foundation of the world and what is true about our salvation is true of us as servants of the Lord.

Paul says to Timothy, '[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began' (2 Tim 1:9). 'So pull up your socks, Timothy,' says Paul, 'fan into flame the gift that is in you' (v. 6). God chose you from the very beginning, before times eternal; not only for salvation but for the work you have to do.

What a marvellous thing it is to come to the Sunday School class, or the toddlers' group, or whatever it is you come to, with the knowledge that from eternity God chose you for this task. Elders, don't lose heart when you meet to consider the welfare of the saints and whether they're doing well or badly; behind your work are the eternal counsels of God.

Other manuscripts at this point read, 'he chose you as the firstfruits', and that is probably the original thing that Paul wrote. It means simply that when God saved the Thessalonians he didn't have them only in mind, he meant also to save other people; and so they were the firstfruits of a bigger harvest that was going to be. That's a lovely thought, isn't it?

When God chose Abram he didn't choose him for himself alone; and when God chose the Israelites he didn't choose them for themselves alone. He chose them, that in them all the nations of the earth should be blessed (Gen 18:18). My brothers and sisters, when God decided to save you, he didn't do it just for your sakes. It was for your sakes, of course, but he chose you as firstfruits so that through you others might be reached in an ever extending and widening circle. He chose you as the firstfruits of a coming harvest.

*'Through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth'*

How could we ever stop thanking God when we think of what God has done for us? There's the great work of sanctification—God chose us, saved us, called us, and he was determined to sanctify us. He has given us his Spirit—that Holy Spirit who brought us to conviction and to faith. 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). He has given us eternal security—it's not only that God has spoken and had it written down by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but God saw that it was necessary for the Holy Spirit to do the research about the deep things of God so that he might reveal them to us (1 Cor 2:10).

I have a little interest in astronomy and physics. When I was in Japan I had an extraordinary opportunity. There was a real, live physicist, and I was able to put my questions to him because he'd done the research on it. The trouble with me is that I'm interested in these things but, not having learned them properly or done any research, I don't even know what sensible questions to ask. He gently corrected me when I asked, 'What is energy?' He very politely said, 'That's a silly question to ask.' Well I didn't know it was a silly

question to ask, so I said, 'What question should I ask?' And then he told me what questions to ask, because he's done all the research.

Who wouldn't give thanks for the Holy Spirit's work on our behalf? God has not only given us his revelation in Christ, but he's given us his Holy Spirit, who has researched the deep things of God and is within us to make them known. The secret of knowing God and his Word is the Holy Spirit within. He not only searches the deep things of God, but he searches our hearts. If it were left for my prayers to bring me home to glory, I shouldn't get very far. My ambitions are so tiny and my desires are so weak. 'And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God' (Rom 8:27). Thank God for the Holy Spirit within who yearns and desires. The old English says he 'lusts', but meaning 'he desires from me,' and 'intercedes with groanings too deep for words' (Rom 8:26). God listens to his prayers and answers them for my sake and for yours.

So God has loved us, he has chosen us and brought us to salvation. Now he's in process of sanctifying us; and he is going to do something else.

*'He called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ'*

These are marvellous things to give thanks for. Notice what that word *called* means. It doesn't say, 'He *will call* us one day.' He *has called* us and, as the theologians say, the call was *effective*. It was a call you obeyed and it guarantees that one day you will share the very glory of Christ when he comes.

What a triumphant position we have as believers. He chose us, because he set his love on us. He has called us, he has saved us, he has given us his Spirit to sanctify us; and one day when the Lord comes he's going to glorify us. So we give thanks.

## **2. What have we got to do in the light of all that (v. 15)?**

*'Stand firm and hold the traditions'*

The danger is we lose our stickability. We yield ground and we go backwards and downhill. There is always an insistent pressure for God's people to give up the traditions taught in God's holy Word. The world outside attacks the sacred foundational principles of the gospel, but we must learn to stand firm. Within Christendom itself there are all sorts of modern theories and pressures to abandon the traditions. Paul pleads with us to stand firm and hold them fast. That is reasonable in the light of what God has done and what God is going to do.

## **3. And finally, what will God yet do?**

Paul prays that he would do two things (vv. 16-17).

*'Comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word'*

Not just comfort them in the sense of helping us to lick our wounds and console us, but encourage us as a general would encourage his troops. 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends,' as King Henry V said in Shakespeare. We need encouragement, and if you could

read our hearts, they're more than a little bit wobbly. They can be up and down, one day enthusiastic and the next day down in the dumps. We put up a good front, but what about our hearts—how shall they be established?

*'Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself'*

Paul pleads that the Lord *himself* will pay personal attention to his appeal. I don't know what your need is this very day, but 'may our Lord Jesus Christ himself'—not some archangel, not even Michael or Gabriel, nor even some great learned apostle like Paul—'comfort and establish your hearts'. May he draw near and give you the inner strength and determination that you need to be effectual and persistent in the work to which God has called you. When he was on earth he not only preached to crowds but drew near and comforted his disciples personally by name, and he does it still. As he sees our need he comforts and establishes our hearts.

So, once more, God the Father has set his love on us and given us eternal encouragement and good hope. He knew that we should very often need encouragement, just as the Angel of the Lord stood by Paul in his particular distress as the ship was being tossed about by the waves (Acts 27:23).

But not only does God do that from time-to-time, his encouragement is eternal. When you come in weary from your work, discouraged, and your heart is low, his encouragement is there for you. All believers shall be like Christ one day (1 John 3:2)—that's built-in encouragement, isn't it? 'My word shall not return to me empty' (Isa 55:11)—that's his promise, and the encouragement is built-in. The mansions are nearly ready now (John 14:2 KJV)! Our Lord has gone to make a place for us; he's coming back, and when we see him we shall be like him. The encouragement is built in to the very scheme of salvation that he has given us. Don't let's get so overwhelmed with the work that we lose the very joy of salvation and the hope of the gospel. He has given us 'Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.'<sup>2</sup>

So Paul wrote to these believers who had been sorely troubled and persecuted when they got saved; and more recently so discouraged by the events that were happening around them that they erroneously thought the Day of the Lord had come (2:2). Confused in belief and confused in emotions, he establishes them in the faith. By God's grace, his words come to us, and we too grasp what God has done for us in the past, what he expects us to do now and what he will yet do through his eternal encouragement and good hope.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Chisholm (1866–1960), 'Great is Thy faithfulness'.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.