**Truth we hold fast** 10/3/24dkm

Read: Job 38:1-18, 2Thessalonians 2

Text: 2Thessalonians 2:13-17

Psalms: 34:1-9, 18:29-36, 28:1-4, 117

Have you had any particular thoughts about God of late? The attributes of God are so many that students spend a whole semester on this topic. My thoughts of late have been on God being infinite. Back in school I learned about mathematical infinity- remember trying to divide 22 by 7! I also learned about physical infinity, about the universe just going on and on to infinity. In Sunday school I learned that, ‘God is a spirit, infinite and eternal, and unchangeable…’ (Shorter Catechism Q4). How is God infinite? His thoughts and his ways are higher than our ways, as Job eventually learnt (cf. Ps 139:17, 18). God’s love ‘surpasses knowledge’, and he is from everlasting to everlasting, the beginning and the end (Rev 1:8). Our faith in anchored in this God. We have an anchor that goes from the beginning to the end of time and space. What can move us when we have such an anchor for our soul (Heb 6:19)?

Winds from various directions will threaten us as we navigate life in this world. The Thessalonians faced winds of persecution, false teaching and sexual immorality; they were ‘shaken in mind and troubled’ (2:2). In writing on this passage, John Stott speaks of Christian stability. In every aspect of life we look for stability: stability in the economy, stability in our home and our church, and even in our cars! We don’t like being tossed about physically or mentally. But troubles came to the Thessalonians, and troubles come our way. Paul’s concern was to help these new believers stand against these winds. He did this by imparting knowledge. First it was knowledge about those who had died being raised from the dead when Jesus comes again. Then it was teaching about sexual purity. And then more teaching about the second coming, this time to counter false teaching.

In countering false teaching, Paul spoke of ‘the man of lawlessness’, teaching which we struggle to understand, even if the Thessalonians did. This teaching ended with words of condemnation upon those who ‘did not receive the love of the truth’ but believed the lie (2:10, 11). As he closes this chapter, Paul speaks words of encouragement and assurance to the believers, urging them to stand fast and hold onto the traditions he taught them (2:15).

Paul returns to giving thanks to God for them, with a prayer very similar to that with which he opened this letter. He feels obliged to give thanks, not thanks to them directly but to God. When he urges them to ‘stand fast’ it is not standing in any works they have done because that would be like standing on sand. They, like you, must stand in the truth of the gospel, in the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Any teaching about salvation that includes an element of works not only detracts from the amazing grace of God, but also leaves us without assurance, without an anchor for our soul. Standing on this rock we have assurance that we will never be moved.

People who trust in their own good works are never sure that they have enough good works to be saved, whereas salvation by grace, as taught in the Bible, tells us that the Lord loved us, chose us, called us and glorified us (Rom 8:30). God did all this in and through his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. These few verses, writes one commentator, set forth ‘a system of theology in miniature’; they are packed with the essential truths of the gospel. Out first subheading is, ‘Chosen and called’, teaching which comes in the form of a prayer of thanks to God. Our second is a ‘therefore’, a, ‘Call to stand fast’, and our third a benediction of, ‘Comfort from the Lord’.

**1. Chosen and called by God**

Midway through his letter, Paul pauses to give thanks to God for these Thessalonian believers. His prayer begins with the same words as his opening prayer: ‘But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you’ (2:13, cf.1:3). Paul was ready to pray anywhere, at any time. He had just written words of condemnation regarding false teachers who were troubling them. He reminded them that God was sovereign in giving them up, and sending a strong delusion upon such as turn away from the truth to believe the lie (2:11). God is sovereign in condemnation and also in election. He has mercy on whom he wills and hardens whom he wills (Rom 9:18). Here in verse 13 he has a ‘but’ as he remembers these faithful believers and gives thanks to God for them; they are listening to his inspired teaching rather than false teaching and deceptive words.

In this prayer the apostle reminds the brethren, and us as we read this letter, of four fundamental truths regarding our salvation. We call these truth the doctrines of grace because they all refer to what God in his grace has done to save us from sin and death, eternal death and destruction (2:10).

The first of these is, ‘Loved by God’. Paul calls these brothers and sisters, ‘beloved by the Lord’. Our salvation begins and ends with God’s love for us, love shown in sending his only begotten and beloved Son to the cross for our salvation. ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son’ (John 3:16). God is love (1John 4; 8). In his closing benediction, Paul again refers to God’s love for us (2:16). Another benediction refers to the love of God, along with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2Cor 13:14). Here in this prayer, Paul also refers to the three persons of the Trinity (2:13, 14).

The second grace is the choosing or election of God. Our translation rightly has, ‘God from the beginning chose you for salvation’ (2:13). Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 1:4. He takes us back to the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. God not only knows all things; he foreordains whatsoever comes to pass (Shorter Catechism Q7). God’s plan for his creation, and his new creation, includes your salvation, if you are one of his chosen ones. If you are truly saved, know that you are one of God’s elect. Jesus reminded his disciples, ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’ (John 15:16).

Thirdly, as a person who is chosen and saved, you have been given the Holy Spirit and are being sanctified or made holy in Christ. While hearing the gospel preached, the Holy Spirit entered your heart to convict you of your sin and move you to repentance and belief in Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of, ‘sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth’ (2:13). Sanctification, like justification or being saved, is by grace through faith or belief. There is no place for works, but at the same time there is no place for idleness either (3:11). Sanctification is a process, and we must allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, producing fruits of the Spirit in our lives (1Thess 5:16-22). Just as physical laziness is dangerous in terms of poverty and death, spiritual laziness is also dangerous to life.

The fourth doctrine of grace is the calling of God: ‘Called by our gospel’ (2:14). God’s call comes through the preaching of the gospel, which is why he commands us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). Paul and his fellow missionaries brought the gospel to Thessalonica, and the elect believed. They were born again of the Spirit of God. Being ‘in Christ’ they shared in his glory, just as we do (2:14). Even now we have a glimpse of his glory; when he appears we will see him in all his glory, and will be changed to be like him (1John 3:2).

Are you looking forward to seeing Christ in all his glory, or are you satisfied with the fading glories of this world? Those who suffer affliction and persecution, like the Thessalonians, are often more focussed on the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, but through meditating on God and his grace in Jesus Christ, we can all draw nearer to our Lord and share in his glory.

**2. Call to stand fast**

From a prayer of thanks to God for these brethren, Paul moves to a ‘Therefore, brethren’ as he urges them to cling to the truths he taught them (2:15). People in the criminal justice system talk about ‘recidivism’, habitual relapses into crime. It is a serious concern with criminals but even more serious with converts in the church. Judas, who was one of the Twelve, betrayed Jesus; Jesus called him ‘the son of perdition’ (John 17:12). Sadly, we see once keen Christians back walking in the mud from which they were taken (2Peter 2:22). By the way, such behaviour is no reflection on the doctrine of election. Apostasy still occurs today and will continue (2:3). The important thing for you to do is cling to the truth, to the doctrines of grace as we find them in the Bible.

Paul calls these truths ‘traditions’ (2:15), but they are not what we think of as traditions, which are the traditions of men or of the church. Paul is referring to the truths of gospel which he taught the Thessalonians. He specifies traditions taught, ‘whether by word or our letter’ (2:15). These believers did not have the NT in writing. All they had, apart from the OT, was the preaching of Paul over three Sabbaths, and his two letters; Timothy may have taught things when he visited.

The essential truths of the gospel we have just seen in Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians. You can also find them in his letter to the Corinthians if you look there (1Cor 15:1-11). Often it is not a lack of knowledge that leads to backsliding but a lack of commitment. When an athlete stops training they slow down, and even stop running altogether. A rider who stops pedalling will fall off. It is the same in the Christian life. When a Christian gives up praying, reading their Bible and coming to public worship, what do you see? Maybe you have done this at some time, but God in his grace has got you back into the means of grace and the joy of the Lord. The Christian life is not easy, but it’s a race you must complete if you want to live and not perish. Let us not get entangled in the sins of the world. Fix your eyes on Jesus and run with endurance (Heb 12:2). Hold fast the word of God and throw it at the devil when he tempts you. Put on the armour of God that you may be able to stand in the day of evil (Eph 6:11f).

**3. Comfort in the Lord**

‘Now may our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2:16). These words sound like a benediction or prayer of blessing, and they are, but we have not come to the end of the letter. We saw a similar benediction in his first letter, again in the middle of the letter (1Thess 3:11). The context here in this chapter is teaching about apostasy and testing times that will continue. Paul knows and wants them to know that, although they feel weak, and even defeated, the Lord will give them the strength to press on. He does not mention the ‘*Parousia*’ in this prayer but this is what this chapter is about. When you hear the benediction at the end of a worship service, do you take it to heart; do you find comfort and encouragement, or do you say ‘It’s over, I’m out of here?’

This benediction is remarkable because Jesus is mentioned before God the Father; he speaks of both with a personal and possessive ‘our’ (2:16, cf.1Thess 1:11). Then writing of the Son and Father, he uses verbs in the singular- ‘loved us’ and ‘given us’. Paul was a Jew who prayed the Shema: ‘The Lord our God is one’ (Deut 6:4). Yet here he is not only bracketing Jesus with God, but referring to Jesus before God the Father. The Trinity is an essential truth of the gospel.

Our Jesus and our God has ‘loved us and by his grace given us eternal encouragement and good hope’ (2:16 NIV). God is the greatest lover and the greatest giver of all. God’s love is so great that he loved us while we were still sinners, rebelling against him. He set his love upon me, not because I was worthy but because he chose me. He first loved me, and I stand in him because of his love. Even as we cling to God, as Paul just urged us to do, let us remember that he clings to us in his covenant love.

In his covenant love, God has given us ‘every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ’ (Eph 1:3). He has given us his Spirit. By his Spirit he encourages and strengthens us, and gives us hope when the going gets tough and even hopeless. This blessing should quell any fears or doubts that trouble our hearts. It goes without saying that neglecting the means of grace, and therefore failing to hear these blessed words, leaves you open to doubts and fears, and attacks of the evil one.

The final blessing is for the Lord to ‘comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work’ (2:17). This is sanctification. In order to grow and mature in Christ, we need assurance that he has us in his hand for ever and ever. Too many children do not know the blessing of being in a family, a family that loves them no matter what. Too many Christians do not know this blessing either, the blessing of God’s unfailing love. Knowing God’s covenant love gives us a firm foundation for going forth into this hostile world, telling of his love for us in the cross of Christ. As established or ‘firm-footed’ believers, let us be men and women whose every word is a good word, and whose every deed is a good deed; words and deeds that please the Lord and bring glory of his holy name.