

The Thessalonians had faced a number of things that had threatened to destabilize their faith. They had seen persecution (1 Thess. 1:4–6; 3:2–4), had fears regarding the Lord’s coming (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11), and had been exposed to false teaching (2 Thess. 2:1–12). Nevertheless, Paul was confident that they would stand firm in their faith; if God had chosen and called them, He would surely bring them safely home.

As someone has said, verses 13 and 14 are a mini theology of salvation that even includes all three members of the trinity.

2:13 But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

2:14 It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

By using the word “but” Paul contrasts “those who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness” (2:12) to those whom God had chosen for salvation in Thessalonica.

Paul tells the Thessalonians what he thanks God for, but the content of his thanksgiving is also aimed at bringing comfort and peace in the midst of their trials and fears.

Paul thanks God that He chose the Thessalonians for salvation. “Choose,” as it is used here, is one of a number of words that conveys the idea of election (1 Thess. 1:4; Ro. 9:11; 11:5; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10; Tit. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:10; Rev. 17:14 etc.). We do not choose God; God chooses us. Verses 13 and 14 are similar to Romans 8:30 in content: “these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

Paul saw his own salvation and the salvation of others as the result of God’s choosing. Paul already spoke of God’s choice of the Thessalonians for salvation in 1 Thessalonians 1:4. Galatians 1:15–16 records Paul’s understanding of his conversion: “But when He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.” Notice that Paul believed “when it pleased God”; Paul’s salvation was dependent on God’s timetable; it was dependent upon the sovereign will of God. Secondly, it was dependent on God’s initiative: God called Paul. In John 15:16 Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Thirdly, God’s call is by grace; it is unmerited. God did not call Paul because there was something in Paul that caught God’s eye or made him stand out above others. Lastly, it was dependent on God revealing truth; “to reveal” means to disclose truth that would otherwise not be known. Truth about Christ would have remained hidden from Paul had not God revealed it to him.

In Jesus’ words in John 6:56: “no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” And again, in John 6:65, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” Jesus also said in John 10:27–28, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give

eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.” Notice that the elect are called Christ’s sheep even before they hear His voice and follow Him (also Jn. 10:16). Jesus’ sheep believe because they are His sheep; they do not become His sheep by believing. If belief made people His sheep, Jesus should have said the opposite in verse 27: “You are not of My sheep because you do not believe.” Being one of Christ’s sheep (chosen by God) is what enables people to respond to His call. This is the doctrine of election.

Verse 13 also tells us the time of God’s election: “God has chosen you *from the beginning*.” The “beginning” (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς not ἀπαρχῆν [firstfruits] is the more likely reading—Stott, 176) can only mean “before time began.” Ephesians 1:4 says, “He [God] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (also see Eph. 3:11). Revelation 13:8 refers to the unbelieving as “everyone whose name has not been *written from the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb.”

Lastly, verse 13 shows that the eternal choice of God includes not only salvation but also *the means by which salvation is realized* (Frame, 281). Salvation comes about “through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.” In other words, the actual attainment of salvation is accomplished through (1) the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and (2) faith in the gospel (the truth).

“Faith in the truth” forms a stark and deliberate contrast to the previous verses where the unbelieving are described as those who “did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” (2 Thess.2:10), and those “who did not believe the truth” (2 Thess. 2:12). Just as salvation has a divine dimension, so it involves a human response in the form of faith (Wanamaker, 267).

Verse 14 moves from God’s eternal choice in the past to His historical call that makes salvation effectual. Having *chosen* the Thessalonians for salvation from the beginning, God then called them to salvation through the gospel. “The God who chose them to be saved is the same God who made sure that the message of salvation reached them by means of the apostolic proclamation of the gospel” (Green, 327).

The call of God to salvation is a common theme in the NT (Ro. 1:6,7; 8:28, 30; 9:11, 24; 1 Cor. 1:9, 24; Gal. 1:6; 5:8; Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 4:7; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 9:15; 11:8; Ja. 2:7; 1 Pet. 1:15; 2:9, 21; 3:9; 5:10; 2 Pet. 1:3, 10; Jude 1:1, etc.). Although human messengers are employed to spread the gospel, God is always and only the one who calls. God’s call is the act of God whereby men are brought to salvation (Ro. 9:12; Eph. 4:4; 1 Thess. 2:12). It is an effectual call; that is, all whom God calls are saved. Once the light of the glory of Christ is seen (revealed) men joyfully embrace it.

When Paul says, “it was for *this* He called you” he is referring to the salvation he had just spoken about in verse 13—we were called for the salvation that comes about through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth (2:13). Thus, our salvation comes about by the work of the Spirit and faith (2:13), and is also a state into which we have been called (2:14); the sanctifying work of the Spirit and faith are active in our lives until salvation reaches its end.

Furthermore, Paul states that God has called us to this salvation through the gospel. The Holy Spirit applies the truth of the gospel to our minds and hearts so we believe. The gospel is the means by which

the call comes to us. It is evident that the doctrine of election does not make proclaiming the gospel non-essential; rather, it is through the preaching of the gospel that God calls men to Himself (Stott, 176).

The ultimate purpose of the calling is to obtain “the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” By “obtain” Paul doesn’t mean “earn,” but “receive and possess.”

In the most general sense, “glory” was used of an external physical characteristic that attracts attention and makes something or someone significant or prominent (ISBE). The trees of Lebanon, for example, are called the glory of Lebanon (Isa. 60:13), for they are an outstanding feature of that country. Men can also possess glory, especially men of prominence, like kings. “This glory may consist in wealth, power, portion, or even in the inherent majesty and dignity of character of its possessor” (ISBE). God is called the King of glory (Psa. 24), for His dignity, power, majesty, and wealth are beyond comparison. This use of glory is surely fitting of Christ for He is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

God gives glory to His people or to anything which is connected with Him. In Isaiah 60:7 God says, “I will glorify the house of My glory.” This clearly means that “He will impart to His house something of the beauty and majesty which belong to Him” (ISBE). In 1 Thessalonians 2:12, God calls us into His own kingdom and glory. Therefore, when Paul says, “you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” he probably means that God will impart to us something of the beauty and majesty which belong to Him and Christ.

However, believers will also obtain glory when in the future they are transformed into the form of Christ.

- Romans 8:17: if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that *we may also be glorified with Him*.
- Romans 8:29: those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified *He also glorified*.
- 1 Corinthians 15:43: it (our body) is sown in dishonor, *it is raised in glory*
- Philippians 3:21: (God) will transform our lowly body to be like His (Christ’s) glorious body . . .

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul said that the unbelieving “will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, *away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power*.” By contrast, our salvation culminates in the entrance into Christ’s presence and sharing in His glory and the glory of His kingdom. We have been chosen from the beginning and we will gain the glory of Christ in the end. From eternity past to eternity future we are secure in the hands of God.

As Stott so ably says,

There is nothing narrow-minded about the apostle Paul! His horizons are bounded by nothing less than the eternities of the past and the future. In the eternity of the past God chose us to be saved. Then He called us in time, causing us to hear the gospel, believe the truth and be sanctified in the Spirit, with a view to our sharing Christ’s glory in the eternity of the future. In a single sentence the apostle’s mind sweeps from “the beginning” to “the glory.” There is no room

in such a conviction for fears about Christian instability. Let the devil mount his fiercest attack on the feeblest saint, let the Antichrist be revealed and the rebellion break out, yet over against the instability of our circumstances and our characters, we set the eternal stability of the purpose of God (Stott, 177).

Once Paul has assured the readers of their salvation, he moves to how they should live as Christians. More specifically, in verse 15 Paul returns to the principle concern of this section: the stability of the Thessalonian Christians in the face of false teaching (Green, 329). This may surprise us since he just thanked God for the security of His purposes, but the Bible often combines our responsibility with the promises of God.

2:15 So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

“So then” indicates that what follows is the logical consequence of what preceded (Morris, 239, 240) and confirms that the teaching in the previous verses laid the foundation for the commands that follow (Marshall, 209). Because we have a great salvation that rests solely upon God Himself we should respond accordingly: we should stand firm and hold to the traditions which we were taught.

The first of two commands is to stand firm. As a present imperative the durative nature of the verb comes out. That is, the implication is that they need to continue standing firm for their trial may be prolonged. Normally, “stand firm” has an object such as “stand firm in the faith.” Specifically, Paul has in mind their need to keep standing firm against the false claims that Christ had already come (2 Thess. 2:2ff.).

The second command is to hold to the traditions which they were taught. The verb is also a present imperative with the same connotations as above. They need to keep holding onto the traditions which they were taught.

In English, “tradition” has the concept of a custom that is passed down from one generation to the next. This was not the case here. “Tradition” was a technical term referring to the handing down of material, whether orally or in writing, as an authoritative teaching (Marshall, Luke, 42; TDNT II, 171, Hodge, 206. etc.).

Paul uses the term “traditions” a lot in his letters with reference to (1) the gospel message (1 Cor. 15:1–3), (2) the practices that govern the church (1 Cor. 11:23–25), and (3) the ethical precepts that were passed on (1 Cor. 7:10; 11:2; 1 Thess. 4:1). In each case the traditions were not derived from men, but directly from Christ’s life and teaching, or the historical facts of His death, resurrection, and ascension (Morris, 240, n. 53). For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:3 Paul said, “I delivered to you as of first importance *what I also received*, that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*.” In Galatians 1:11–12 he said, “the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For *I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ*.” Lastly Peter said, “we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*” (2 Peter 1:16). Thus, “traditions” were not

optional or culturally bound practices; they were to be employed in all the churches as part of Christian practice.

For us, these traditions are embodied in the NT, but for Paul's original readers the entire NT had not yet been recorded; what they knew was primarily received by word of mouth and in the contents of Paul's previous letter to them ("the letter from us"—that is, 1 Thessalonians; Wanamaker, 268). This demonstrates that apostolic authority extended to both the spoken and written words of the apostles. Paul is therefore commanding them to hold to the authoritative teaching which they had received from him. In the context, the specific "tradition" that Paul wanted them to hold on to was the gospel message which included teachings of the second coming of Christ.

The derivative nature of the traditions is a reminder that we ought not depart from it in any way. That is, since the "traditions" were not of human origin we must stand fast in them (Morris, 241).

***2:16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace,
2:17 comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.***

Verses 16 and 17 form a wish-prayer before Paul concludes. Paul has told the Thessalonians to act, but he is also aware that they can do nothing by their own strength, so he directs them to the source of comfort and strength.

Jesus is described in the fullest terms (the Lord Jesus Christ). He is mentioned first (before the Father), which in Greek, is a position of emphasis or prominence. In addition, the subject of the sentence is plural (Christ and God) but the participles (loved and gave) and the main verb (comfort) are singular in Greek, linking the Father and the Son together as one. Paul had already spoken of the glory of God (1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:9) and the glory of Christ (2 Thess. 2:14) showing the closeness of the relationship between them. These nuances place Christ in the highest plane imaginable. Paul is not making a formal declaration about Christ's deity, but the equality of the Father and the Son flows naturally from his lips (Morris, 241).

God is spoken of as "God our Father who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace." All of these terms are significant and deserve attention.

The love we receive is of divine origin. It is the love of a father toward his children. God's love and election often appear together.

Faced with rejection and persecution and the prospective turmoil of the end times, the Thessalonians needed to realize that God would be their source of encouragement (*παράκλησις*—*paraklesis*), and that His encouragement would last beyond their current trials into eternity. Thus, Paul describes God as the one who has given us eternal comfort.

Furthermore, they have been given a good hope. Hope is assurance in God's promises to come. The hope God gives is rightly called "good" for it is not an empty hope but is a hope that will endure to the end until our salvation is realized (Frame, 287).

“By grace” is adverbial and is to be read with “given.” We are given eternal comfort by grace and we are given hope by grace. All we have is due to God’s unmerited favor freely bestowed. God’s gifts are dependent upon His goodness, not on the worthiness of the recipients (Marshall, 212).

Paul’s prayer is that God establish believers in every good work and word (2:17). In Greek, “comfort” and “strengthen” are in a form (the optative mood) that expresses wishfulness on the speaker’s part. This is why Wanamaker calls verses 16–17 a wish-prayer. “Work and word” stress the inward and outward behavior. Words express what is in the heart. “Work” is Christian action.