

Hoping . . .In Light Of His Coming

Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron R. Ritchie

A few days ago a young Christian woman dropped by our home to visit my wife and me. We always enjoy her visits, as she has a sense of joy about her that we find very attractive and encouraging. I could not help thinking back to a Saturday several years ago when she and her girl friend first visited our home. That day, my wife and I were talking with a young man from our church Careers group who had just become a Christian. This man, who had a background that was very far removed from godliness, had become quite excited about his new faith. As he listened to the two young women talk about their lives and their involvements, he suddenly spoke up. He said that the philosophy they were following would produce nothing but emptiness and hopelessness and would eventually kill them. He was speaking from experience, he said, as he had in the past followed the same lifestyle they were now espousing.

After lunch I set about doing some work, while the young women, my zealous Christian friend and my wife continued the conversation. A little while later we all found ourselves sitting around the table once again. I was delighted and amazed when the girls suddenly said they wanted to invite Jesus Christ into their lives. It seems the combination of the conviction of the Holy Spirit, the word of Scripture, and the love and boldness of those they were listening to struck home and they came under conviction. In the years that have passed since I have watched in particular this young woman who came by last week. God has filled her heart with a living hope. She is a woman whose life is marked by good works and good words--everything that God wants his children to be.

That is what I want to talk about this morning in our study in Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica--the Christian's hope. I have entitled this message. "Hoping . . . in Light of His Coming:' In this section, verses 13 through 17 of chapter 2, we will see that God has chosen us for salvation; and that God will strengthen us for good works.

Paul's letter is one of encouragement, instruction and admonishment to the Thessalonians regarding the "day of the Lord." Having come under the influence of false teachers, they began to fear that this day had already come and they had missed it. So Paul again shares in his letter the doctrine of the second coming of Christ and outlines the order of the events of that time. First, he says, comes the "apostasy," then the "man of sin" must be revealed, but not until the "restrainer" is removed. Meanwhile, the persecution and affliction they were suffering resulted from the "mystery of lawlessness which was already at work." Then he asks, rather plaintively, "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?"

Paul goes on to describe the fate of the antichrist: "the Lord will slay [him] with the breath of his mouth . . . [at] His coming." Then, he says, God will judge all "who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness!" What very bad news for those "who did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved:"

But the good news for the Thessalonians was that they were a community who had a living hope, as Paul will go on to show in this section. First,

1. God Has Chosen Us for Salvation 2:13-15

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. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

"These three short verses contain an entire system of theology. Paul's thankfulness to God covers the whole work of creation, from the eternal choice of God to the sharing of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in the world to come. Here in miniature form, as it were, we have God's heart, mind and desire for his children.

Paul is filled with thankfulness to God on the Thessalonians' behalf for three reasons. First, he is thankful that God had chosen them from the beginning for salvation. He begins with the word "But," thereby contrasting those whom God had chosen from the beginning and those "who did not believe the truth" (verse 12). He was thankful for these believers because he remembers who they were before they had heard and received the gospel. "They were formerly idol worshipers who were enslaved by the doctrines of demons, held captive by the "prince of the power of the air." They were indulging in the desires of the flesh, and "were by nature children of wrath."

And Paul remembered who they had become: they were now beloved of God, examples to all the believers in northern Greece. They were "servants of the living God," "lovers of one another," living a lifestyle that was pleasing to God. They were no longer sons of darkness but had become sons of light. They were brothers and sisters for eternity, filled with a steadfast hope in our Lord.

How did this happen? How were they delivered from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's Son? God chose them, Paul says--just as God has chosen you and me. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament. It speaks of special significance; it means to select, or to elect. Paul is saying that out of all lost humanity, God selected a people for himself to be holy and blameless (Eph. 1:4). Moses spoke of this process of selection in his address to the Israelites, quoted in Deuteronomy 7:6-8: "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery . . . "

This election or selection is clearly stated in Ephesians 1:4: ". . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him." That anyone should be so selected by God is a great mystery. What a testimony to the grace and the love of God! When I first came to faith in Christ, I felt everything was going according to my timetable. But now that I am in the process of maturing in Christ, I have discovered, to my great amazement, that I had very little to do with my selection. God chose me before the foundation of the world, based on his mercy, love and grace, period. I brought nothing but my helplessness. I was dead in my sins.

Then Paul tells the Thessalonians that God chose them for salvation. Salvation and redemption has always been God's primary objective for man ever since the creation of the world . . . "For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life" Earlier Paul had written to these same Thessalonians: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him" (I Thess. 5: 9,10).

Christians are saved from the penalty of sin: that is called justification. Jesus came to this earth as the Lamb of God who was willing to suffer death on Calvary as a sacrifice for our sins. He took our place, and allowed the wrath of God to fall on himself rather than on us. My placing my faith in him as Lord and Savior saved me from sin, shame and guilt, and eternal separation from God and his glory. Salvation is granted immediately by God to those who accept his condition of repentance and place their faith in Jesus in whom alone salvation is obtained. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Paul would write later in his letter to the Romans: . . . it' you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved, for with the heart man believes resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation . . . "

You know, I am always amazed when I am privileged to see the power of the gospel at work. Recently I talked

with a young man who said someone had shared the gospel with him but he didn't quite understand it. He was a great big husky fellow who had just recently finished college. After I had shared the gospel with him he bowed his head and invited Christ into his heart. As he did so, I was amazed that what he had heard from this other person and what he had just heard from me had so humbled him that he was ready to confess his sins and come to Christ. I ended up taking him to lunch and introducing him to some other young Christians. His whole life has changed since the Spirit of God spoke to his heart and he received him.

The second reason Paul is so thankful to God on behalf of the Thessalonians is that God has sanctified them by the Spirit and faith in the truth. "Sanctification" means to be set apart for your intended use or purpose. Before we became Christians, we lived in the lusts of our flesh and our minds, destroying ourselves. We were never meant to live like that, but rather were created to live for the glory and honor of our Creator. But sin made us unable to respond to this high calling. We continued to serve ourselves. The moment we placed our faith in Jesus Christ, however, we discovered that "our lives were not our own; we were bought with a price." Our lives are now the property of God, and he has no desire to allow us to continue ruining our lives. Paul had already written to the Thessalonians, 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passions, like the Gentiles who do not know God . . . ' (I Thess. 4:3,4).

The people who are destroying themselves in this world are doing so because they do not know God. Don't be angry at them, but be angry at Satan who is victimizing them. They do not know how they should live. They do not have the power nor the desire for righteousness. According to Ephesians 2, they are "dead in their trespasses and sins."

Sanctification is the state which a Christian enjoys because for the first time he is free from the power of sin. I've always hated that because it means that every time I sin now it's because I want to, not because I have to, not because I didn't have a choice. That takes all the fun out of sin now. I still get involved in it but there's not the same joy I once had in it. For instance, the other day I cut in front of a bike rider and he had the temerity to yell at me and didn't stop yelling until I got out of my car. Everything in the old Ron Ritchie surfaced immediately. I wanted to deal with this man. Didn't he realize what power lay in this body of mine, I thought to myself. As I walked toward him however, I was thankful when I saw that he was smaller than me! Then I heard the voice of the Spirit say, "You don't have to do this!" I had already given away what I really wanted to do by saying to him, "Say what?" "You cut me off," he said to me, "why can't you just take a moment to look where you're turning?" I heard myself respond, by the Spirit of God, "Excuse me, I'm sorry I cut you off." I got back in the car, feeling weak in my flesh, a feeling I don't like! But the Spirit rejoiced because I was willing to continue the process of being sanctified, to continue the process of "being holy, as He is holy." I was willing to let God deal with me. By his Spirit at that moment, I had the power to be godly. Whether I felt like it or not, it was mine.

That's how we grow in sanctification. It is a process that causes us to be increasingly detached from the world and more attached to Christ, until his image is completely formed in you and me.

Commenting on sanctification, the Puritan writer John Owen wrote,

Sanctification is an immediate work of the Spirit of God on the souls of believers purifying and cleansing of their natures from the pollution and uncleanness of sin, renewing in them the image of God and thereby enabling them, from a spiritual and habitual principle of grace, to yield, obedience unto God . . .

Because of their faith in Jesus Christ, Christians are placed in Christ and cleansed of sin, made righteous, justified and purified and declared sons of God. In his position in Christ, the Christian stands righteous and accepted before God forever. Isaiah 61:10 says, 'I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for he has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.'

So, according to Paul, God had sanctified the Thessalonians by the Spirit and faith in the truth." They had come to faith when the apostle and his fellow-workers were in Thessalonica. These men entered the synagogue and "reasoned with them from the Scriptures; explaining and giving evidence that Christ had to suffer and rise

again from the dead, and saying "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." So the stage was set: there were the proclaimers, the audience, the word of God, and the Holy Spirit.

J.I. Packer in his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit* writes,

The witnessing Spirit would act as humanity's prosecutor, working heart after heart the verdict "I was wrong; I am guilty; I need forgiveness" as He brings home the enormity of rejecting Jesus or at least not taking Him seriously enough. This is a promise of the Spirit's aid in evangelism. His way of convincing and convicting is through Christian persuading as the Church relays the apostolic message; his witness is a matter of his opening the inward ear and applying to the individual conscience the truths that witnessing Christians set before the mind.

As Paul was sharing the word of God, the truth of the gospel, the Holy Spirit was working on the hearts of men, women and children in the audience, Jew and Gentile alike. The next step was the individual's responsibility to respond to the truth by faith in the evidence presented. Hebrews says, "without faith it is impossible to please God, for man must believe that God is and that he is a rewarder of all who seek Him." But before man can have faith he must have knowledge. Knowledge always precedes faith. The word of God presents to man the truth of God, and the word of God presents facts which faith may lay hold of. Apart from knowledge there can be no working faith.

Paul sets out this truth very beautifully in Romans 10, where he poses a series of questions following his quoting of the words of the prophet Joel, "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Paul asks, "How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" A little later Paul says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."

What they need to hear, of course, is the truth of the gospel. God, who is a God of love, mercy and grace, sent his Son to earth as the Lamb without blemish, the living sacrifice to "take away the sins of the world" our sin, shame and guilt. Why did he have to do this? It was because all mankind sinned in Adam; all sinned and fell short of God's perfect standards. Scripture says, "There is none righteous, no, not one." In order to be reconciled to God, therefore, man needed a Savior, someone who would save him from the awful wrath and judgment of God. Jesus Christ was that innocent Lamb of God who took upon himself the sins of mankind. Now everyone who places his or her faith in that finished work of Jesus on the cross, everyone who confesses his sins and confesses Jesus as his Lord and Savior, receives God's forgiveness, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of eternal life; and the fruit of eternal life is wholeness, peace and joy.

Dwight Pentecost has said,

In order that heaven might be populated for eternity with sons. God planned and provided for the miracle of the new birth. He sent the Spirit to accomplish the work. He gave his Son that his Son might provide the basis for salvation by shedding his blood. He gave us the Word so that we might know the Son, that we might come, through faith, to a new birth.

The results of Paul's teaching the truth of the gospel to the Thessalonians, the apostle reports in Acts 17, was that: ". . . some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas along with a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks and a number of leading women." In his first letter to them, Paul says. ". . . we . . . constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." They believed the truth, the truth of the revelation of God in Christ, and received in return the gift of eternal life. Those who did not receive that truth received nothing but eternal separation from God, ruin and destruction.

The third reason Paul is filled with thankfulness to God on behalf of the Thessalonians is that God had called them that they might gain the glory of his Son. The divine call of God is directed towards men to partake in the blessings of redemption. Once a man accepts that call he is born again and he becomes a new creature in Christ. Man, who was once dead in Spirit, is awakened by the Holy Spirit to hear the Spirit's call. As Paul

said, ". . . our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

And God has called you, Paul says, "that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." I don't think the apostle is referring here to the glory we are receiving on earth right now where. as Scripture says, we are being changed 'from one degree of glory to another.'" In this context Paul is referring to the second coming of Christ. The end result of our divine call is that we will share his glory when we return to earth with him as Israel's Messiah in power and great glory. Speaking of glory, we remember the apostle's word to the church at Rome, "The Spirit Himself hears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow- heirs with Christ. it indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:16-18).

Thus Paul has expressed his thankfulness in the three areas we have mentioned: the Thessalonians' salvation, sanctification, and their sharing in the glory of God's Son. In light of these things. he exhorts them to "stand firm and hold to the traditions which [they] were taught" (15). "Stand firm," he says, regardless of the pressures and afflictions, regardless of a false spirit. a message or a letter that taught anything contrary to his teaching on the second coming of Christ. Then, he says, "hold to the traditions which you were taught." Here Paul is referring to the teachings of Jesus while he was on earth, teachings which were being validated day by day by the Holy Spirit working through his apostles. The apostle similarly warned the Colossians to beware "the traditions of men. but hold firm to all that I taught you verbally and in my first letter."

So Paul's heart was filled with thankfulness that God had chosen the Thessalonians for salvation. Secondly, he says.

2. God Will Strengthen Us for Good Works 2 :16,17

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

Paul's heart is filled with thankfulness to God as he contemplates the truth he has just conveyed to the Thessalonians. He is so thankful that he breaks into prayer for these former Jews and Gentile idol worshippers, praising the wonderful God whom they now serve, and expressing his desire that they review God's character. God's gifts, and God's abilities.

First, Paul wants to them to realize afresh that the Christ whom they worship is none other than Jesus himself, God incarnate, risen from the dead and sitting at the right hand of the Father in glory. But he wants them to understand also that Jesus was not in some far away place, but was present in them in the Holy Spirit. and, since they had allowed Jesus to become their personal Lord, God the Father had saved them and changed them from being sons of darkness to being sons of light. The God of the universe and Father of our Lord had become their personal Father.

Secondly, in this prayer Paul reviews for the Thessalonians the gifts which God the Father had given them. He had given them the gift of love. The apostle John would later write, "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God loved us, we also ought to love one another." God has given us a love which we cannot fathom. Let us rejoice because of it. And he has also given the gift of "eternal comfort." This is another name for the Holy Spirit, the "Comforter." Finally, God has given the gift of "good hope by grace." Christians are filled with a living hope.

Thirdly, Paul reviews God's abilities: Paul prayed that God might "comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word." The Thessalonians were being shaken by persecution and affliction, and they feared they might have missed the second coming of Christ. But here Paul reminds them that God was able to comfort their hearts, not to resist persecution, but to go forth and become involved in good works and words.

Yesterday my brother and neighbor Dick Patterson and I were standing outside our homes in Half Moon Bay playing with his children. Another neighbor, a real estate broker, backed her car out on the street, called out to us, handed us her business card and said, "I'm going out to make a sale. Would you both send a prayer up for me?" We both laughed and said, "Sure, we'll do that, Flo." She thanked us and drove away. Dick and I looked at each other, thinking, "What is this? A drive-in prayer booth?" As I thought about why she would ask that I recalled that Dick and I had reached out to these neighbors in the past. When they moved in a couple of years ago, I talked with them and invited them in. There was a 20-foot ladder leaning against my house. and my new neighbor said, "I've got to buy one of those." I said, "It's yours. Take it." He walked off with the ladder, shaking his head and thanking me. A couple of other times my wife and I prayed for them when they were facing difficulties. The Pattersons had reached out in love many times towards this couple also. And because of Spirit--directed good works and kind words, she was turning towards us once again.

God gives us comfort and he "strengthens our hearts in every good work and word." Christians don't have to go around advertising themselves as the "local Christians." We're set free from that to go about our normal business. Then God, by his love and mercy, by his Spirit, through his word and by his people, will enable us to be salt and light wherever we go. We can't even interpret what we're doing, but God will use our good works and good words to draw out of our communities men and women who will be with him forever. We know who we are, and are about our Father's business. We are not ruled by our emotions but by knowledge, so that every word we speak and every action we take is to further the gospel of Jesus Christ and result in the salvation of many.

Paul's word to Titus wraps up everything I've been saying:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His Own possession, zealous for good deeds.

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2 Thessalonians 2:13-17
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