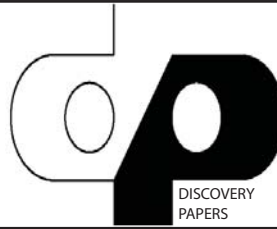


AN UNFINISHED STORY

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians
12th Message
Paul Taylor
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2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

The Seablorians are small aquatic creatures who are very social. They live underground, beneath the floor of the ocean in communities just like ours. They are kind of like underwater smurfs. I'm pretty sure they have blue skin. They are very clever. And they love to laugh.

However, if you search the internet for more information on the Seablorians, you won't find anything. If you search Amazon for a book that tells their story, you will find zero results. There won't even be a suggested word that you might have misspelled. In fact, you are among the very first people in a very long time to have even heard of the existence of the Seablorians.

That's because the only book that speaks of this little-known civilization was written by me and my friends in elementary school. We bound the book with covers made from wallpaper. We drew the illustrations and wrote the text. It was meant to be an entire series. An epic saga telling of the many adventures and escapades of these undersea citizens. But most of their story is untold. One single introductory book that can't even be found on the internet is all there is.

This morning we are in our second to last week in our series on the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians called *Between the Times*. Next week Scott will preach the final sermon for these books. I've really enjoyed studying these books. They have dealt with such a wide range of topics for what life looks like in between the major events of the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus. We've talked about our sexuality, our expectation for the end of the world, grieving well, prayer, thanksgiving, eternal judgment, and more.

We are looking at 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5. It's not the last section in the book, but it has the feel of something coming to an end. You can tell that the apostle Paul is winding down, wrapping up, and preparing his readers for moving forward in life and faith. As he does this, he wants them to understand they are part of an unfinished story.

First, Paul returns to the beginning. He thanks God for making himself known to them and giving them faith. He reminds them that God will continue to be faithful to them. And he encourages them to participate in the movement of the Gospel in the world. The point throughout this section is to show them that God has started something with them. He wants them to see that what has happened to them is only the beginning of the story.

We can benefit from the same perspective. It is very easy with everything going on in our lives to be completely focused on our circumstances—our needs, our emotions, our careers and families, and victories, defeats, and frustrations. It is so easy to get focused on the narrow story of our lives. We know we are part of something bigger, but it is hard to remember why that is important. The scope of our life changes when we remember that these believers in the Greek city of Thessalonica, almost 2000 years ago, are part of the same movement as we.

They were living, just as we are, in between two major events. We are all trying to live faithfully in light of the resurrection of Jesus, as we expect his return any moment. As we wait, how do we participate in the movement of this message? How do we recognize that our lives, our church, our generation is part of the unfinished story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ building the kingdom of God? How do we do that at the same time as we worry about where we are going to eat lunch after church?

The words in this passage are a helpful guide. They will remind us of how relationship with God begins, what he does to empower faith to continue, and how to be a part of the Gospel movement in the world.

Thank God for His Invitation

The apostle Paul loves to give thanks for the people to whom he is writing. We have seen this over and over again in this book. Often, what he gives thanks for sets him up for what he wants to talk about. That is the case here as well. Let's read **2 Thessalonians 2:13-14**:

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. ¹⁴To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle begins this passage by giving thanks that God has chosen the Thessalonians. It is an odd thing to give thanks for. Thank God that he chose you. What does it mean to be chosen by God?

We find this sort of language all throughout the Bible. God chose Abraham in the Old Testament; he chose Jacob to be the father of his people; he chose David to be their king; Jesus was chosen to be the Messiah; God chooses people to respond in faith to Jesus and become part of his kingdom.

Let's think about being chosen for a moment. In our culture, being chosen is often a good thing. We apply to schools and jobs and programs and want to be chosen for acceptance. Athletes get chosen for their teams, whether it is kickball on the elementary school playground, the high school varsity tennis team, or the NFL draft. People run for political office and want to be chosen by the voters as their representative. We fall in love with someone and want them to choose us over anyone else.

One common cliché in our movies and books is to be "The Chosen One." The Urban Dictionary defines this as "*the sole person chosen by destiny to stop an impending disaster that threatens all life, save the world from a super villain, stop corruption, etc. Basically, the only person who can save the day.*" It is a role that is usually accepted somewhat reluctantly. There's often a "who, me?" type of attitude just before that person turns into an incredible hero.

Other times in our culture, we don't like the idea that some are chosen above others. We don't hold to the "divine right of kings" anymore because it doesn't seem fair that God would choose one family lineage to be king, unless you're a fan of the royal family in England. We are wary of jobs and schools choosing people for the wrong reasons: their gender or race or ethnicity. We want to control those choices.

Sometimes we want to be chosen. Other times we reluctantly accept being chosen. Still, other times we are suspicious of someone being chosen over another.

I think we are uncomfortable when we are talking about God choosing people because it raises

questions: How does God decide who to choose? What about people who aren't chosen? How is any of this fair? It sounds really weird to thank God that he chose us. Right away we ask the question, what about everyone else?

This is similar to what is called "survivor's guilt." This is what you feel if you have suffered through a tragedy where others have been injured or even killed and you've come out okay. You might ask yourself why you were spared. It doesn't seem fair that someone else should suffer and you should be okay.

One of the reasons why we feel uncomfortable with the idea of being chosen is that we think we must have been chosen for a reason—there must be something special about us that made God choose us. If God chose me over someone else, then I must be superior in some way to that other person. You might even wish that someone else had lived instead of you.

But that completely misses the point of why the Bible speaks of God choosing people. The reason why the Bible speaks of God choosing people is to emphasize that salvation depends on divine action, not on human effort. You weren't chosen because you were special. You were chosen because of God's grace. It depends on God, not on you.

Moses explains this in Deuteronomy 7:7, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples."

The purpose of God reminding his people that he chose them is not to make them feel special, but to point out that they aren't special. There is nothing about them that made them more worthy of being chosen. It was simply God's decision.

You might remember that two weeks ago I suggested that God is radically committed to the free will of his creation. That idea is just as clear throughout Scripture. Somehow, in the infinity of God's actions, two things are true at the same time that seem to conflict with each other: God is sovereign and people have free will. I don't think we can understand how those two go together. It's one of the mysteries that we'll grasp when everything is revealed.

But until then, if you know God, then you can be grateful that he has chosen to make himself known to you. It doesn't mean you are special or superior or favored. It means that God has extended an invitation to you only because of his grace. We can thank him for that.

This gratitude makes even more sense when we realize for what God chooses people. The apostle Paul says that the Thessalonians have been chosen “as the firstfruits to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit” (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

The image is an agricultural one. The firstfruits were the initial crop taken from the harvest that was offered as a sacrifice to God. The ancient Greeks used to do this as well as the Jews of the Old Testament. In offering up the first and most significant of the harvest, it was a declaration that the whole harvest belonged to God. More was coming.

So to say that the Thessalonians were chosen as the firstfruits is to say that they have been given the responsibility of paving the way for others to come. One of the reasons that they can give thanks for their salvation is that it is not the end of the story. It is simply a good beginning that is worth celebrating.

God has chosen, but he isn't done choosing.

In fact, this has always been the case. Adam was given life and immediately given the responsibility to care for the life around him. Abraham was chosen and told in Genesis 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you, ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Abraham was blessed in order that he might be a blessing to others.

So first of all, the fact that we are chosen doesn't highlight our value. It shows how dependent we are on God. And secondly, our being chosen doesn't just have to do with us. The choice of God doesn't end with us. God chooses people to receive his blessing in order that they might bless others.

God doesn't choose people merely as recipients, but as conduits. We are not the final destination for God's blessing. We receive it and we participate in passing it on to others. We are more like “the chosen one” who participates in saving the world than the winner of a multi-million dollar lottery.

This is what those who believe in Jesus have been “called to through the gospel” (2 Thessalonians 2:14). The Gospel is the message—the vehicle or means—by which all of this happens. The Gospel comes to us and makes us aware of the invitation to new life. Then, the Gospel goes out from us as we pass on that choice to others. We'll see more of how that works in the last section.

But first, this choice of God might leave us feeling a bit inadequate. We probably have some of the “who, me?” attitude. If we don't, we probably should. We can be thankful that God has chosen us, but we are

also concerned about how to be faithful to this choice. That's where the apostle Paul goes next.

Hold to the Truth

This passage began by giving thanks for the fact that God had chosen the Thessalonians. As it continues, they are given some instruction in how to continue in the choice that God has given them.

2 Thessalonians 2:15-17:

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. ¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

There are two main things in these verses: an encouragement and a prayer. Let's look at the encouragement first. After giving thanks that they have been chosen and called to be firstfruits, the apostle tells the Thessalonians how to handle that. He says, “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught.”

You might remember from last week that there was one specific issue that the Thessalonians were confused about. Somehow they had believed the false idea that Jesus had already returned. The implication was either that they had missed the big day or that they already had everything that was coming; this was as good as it gets: Jesus was already reigning in glory.

Last week Scott helped us to see how that idea simply isn't true. We don't yet have all the promises of the kingdom of God. We can sample the foretaste of what's to come, but we don't yet experience its fullness.

To help the Thessalonians not to get confused by any other ideas like this (that might lead them astray), the apostle Paul gives them the instruction to stick to what they know. Don't let crazy things that other people tell them influence them and make them veer off into weird theological positions. Hold to the traditions that you were taught. Those traditions are captured through Paul's writing as well as his spoken words to them.

So the Thessalonians were tempted to believe some crazy ideas circulating in their culture and they needed something clear and true to help them sort through everything. Does that have any relevance to us?

I say that our culture is full of crazy ideas. We are incredibly optimistic about how technology can give us better lives. We are told that more money or better property or a fancier title will finally make us feel okay about ourselves. We are supposed to be entertained by movies which suggest that sexual violence is seductive and masculine.

There are crazy religious ideas as well. More and more, people are believing the idea that all religions are the same, despite protests by members of each of those individual religions. Within Christianity, there are new opinions about sexuality, and the character of God, and the nature of the world.

At one of our recent elders meetings, we were challenged by some teaching to remember that there are bad ideas in the world. Occasionally, it seems like we've forgotten this. It's as if we think that every idea is a good idea. Or at least that every idea has equal merit. But that's simply not true. There are some really bad ideas out there: culturally, socially, and religiously.

How can we tell which ideas are good and which ideas are bad? We stick to what we know? How can we be faithful to God choosing us? We stick to what we know. And what we know is the Bible. This is why we call our community "Peninsula Bible Church." It is why we see our goal in preaching as explaining these words rather than creating our own. It is why the answer to any question we face has to start with how God revealed himself.

This is especially important to remember as we think about our calling to be the firstfruits of God's choice in the world. As we are called to the Gospel, we need to be grounded in what exactly the Gospel is. We can't be distracted by crazy ideas. We need to hold to the truth.

The tricky thing about this is that some things that we do will change as the culture around us changes. Our goal is never to innovate. We do not come up with something new; but we are called to contextualize: take the unchanging truth of the Gospel and God's Word and apply it to a changing culture.

How do we follow Jesus well when using social media? How do we react to a changing tone of government? What is our international responsibility as the United States in regards to how to steward the resources that God has blessed us with? These are all questions that aren't directly addressed by Scripture, so we have to figure out how to apply the unchanging revelation of God to a changing culture.

I face questions that my parents never faced. My children will face questions that I do not. I am convinced that in a generation, the church will have to figure out how to hold to a biblical sexual ethic in a culture that legalizes and endorses not just same-sex marriage, but other variations on traditional marriage as well. The center of Christian influence is shifting from Europe and the Americas to Africa and Asia. That is going to have massive change around the world.

We are faced with the incredibly difficult task of holding to the truth as the world around us changes. How do we do that? Who is sufficient to that task?

God is. He will be faithful to the church as she navigates these waters. This is why the apostle Paul moves immediately from encouraging the Thessalonians to stand firm to praying that God would take care of them. He prays that God will "comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:17).

Crazy ideas can create doubt and anxiety. Some of us are drawn toward those crazy ideas and we doubt the truth of God. Others are sure of God's truth, but are worried for a world being led astray. The antidote for both doubt and anxiety is comfort from God. All we can do, whether we are doubting the truth or worried for the world, is to trust God. Know that God is in charge.

This previous passage says that God gives us "good hope" (2 Thessalonians 2:16). It's a term that isn't found anywhere else in the New Testament, but was a common one in Greek literature of that day. It usually referred to a general sense that things were going to be okay. Pagan religions used it to refer to life after death, and it was used politically to refer to a general optimism about the state of things.

Here it is used to point out that while lots of people say "everything will be OK in the end," or "things will turn out all right," God has actually given believers the eternal comfort of knowing that this is true. We have actual knowledge that God is sovereign over this world. The prayer to establish our hearts looks forward to help us remember that we are confident that things will be okay because God is at the helm.

We are comforted to continue in faith by the sure foundation that God has revealed himself and he will ensure that truth prevails in the end. There are plenty of bad ideas out there that look compelling. But God will ensure that the truth is known. His revelation will not be thwarted.

Participate in the Gospel Movement

Today's passage has begun with gratitude for God's choice of his people. Then it has moved on to an encouragement to them to stick with what they know as God carries them into the next chapter of his work. Now we see the apostle Paul directly inviting them to be involved in that work. He wants them to see themselves as part of the story that God is telling through the gospel.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5:

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ²and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

This is the second of the two commands that Paul gives in these verses. The first was to stand firm in the truth. This one is to pray for Paul and his companions, for the sake of the Gospel. The apostle wants them to pray that the Gospel would "speed ahead and be honored."

This is a great phrase. The first idea is literally that the gospel would "run ahead." I remember when my kids were really little and I would take them on hikes. It seemed my sons had an endless source of energy. Nothing I could do could tire them out. So as we hiked, I would pick trees farther along the path and have them run to the tree and then back to me. That way I could hike at a normal pace and have a fighting chance at making a dent in their energy levels. Maybe if I was lucky, we could actually get them tired.

That's the kind of imagery here in the Gospel. It's similar to the athletic imagery that Paul used earlier in 1 Thessalonians where he pictures the faith of others as his prize for faithful service. We want the Gospel to run ahead like a runner in a race.

The Gospel is not just an idea. It is not just a message. It is not just a set of facts. It is a movement of God. The Gospel is the means by which God makes the salvation offered through Jesus Christ known to the world. The apostle is inviting the Thessalonians to

pray for his efforts so that the Gospel is unleashed and the kingdom of God expands and grows to encompass more and more people. He wants them to be compelled by this vision of God's work through the gospel.

What about us? Are we compelled by that vision? Do we recognize the story that God is telling in the world? Do we understand that just by meeting here on a Sunday morning, we are part of something that spills over geographical and historical boundaries? We are part of the movement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have the opportunity not just to be a part of it, but to participate in it.

Paul invites the Thessalonians to pray for this because people need to hear it. In just a few words, he describes the reason for the Gospel. It isn't because God hasn't chosen everyone. It's because not everyone believes. He says, "not all have faith" (2 Thessalonians 3:2). The way this is phrased is understated. It's a way of saying, "actually, very few people have faith." To the Thessalonians, it must have felt like very few people indeed believed this incredible message about Jesus Christ.

It can feel that way to us as well. A few weeks ago, the Pew Research Foundation published the results of a study that made a lot of headlines. They claimed that Christian faith in the United States is on a rapid decline. They say this,

*"It's not just millennials leaving the church. Whether married or single, rich or poor, young or old, living in the West or the Bible Belt, almost every demographic group has seen a significant drop in people who call themselves Christians, Pew found."*¹

This report has resulted in a lot of different reactions. Some have desperately concluded that the age of Christendom is coming to end. Some have challenged the findings. Others have said that it presents a bleaker picture than is actually the case.

It is hard to get an accurate picture of the state of the Gospel in the world. You look in one place and you see amazing things happening. You look in another place and you see nothing happening at all. That's why as soon as the apostle points out the reality of the situation, he immediately draws our attention back to God. He says, "Not all have faith, but the Lord is faithful" (2 Thessalonians 3:2-3).

As we participate in the Gospel movement, we can't just look at results to be encouraged. We can't focus on the world or take surveys to convince us that the Gospel is taking effect. The source of our

encouragement is the character of God. The reason this is worthwhile is that we know God is faithful. We don't need to get excited if Jesus starts trending on Twitter. And we don't need to be concerned if a survey says that Christianity is on the decline.

God is faithful. That's how we know that the story of the Gospel movement in the world is not finished. And that is incredibly comforting. As we think about people—loved ones, coworkers, friends, and family—you can know this and take comfort in it. The story of the Gospel in the world is not yet finished.

We know this because we see God at work in our lives. We know that God isn't done with us, so why would we think he might be done with the world? That's why the apostle reminds the Thessalonians of what he has seen in them. He knows that these people are doing what God asks them to do and he has confidence that they will continue on that path.

It is easy to look around at the world and only see the "not all have faith" side of things. But it's easier than you think to look around see the "the Lord is faithful" part. Think about what we as a church participated in when we went out into the community to serve as part of Beautiful Day. Think about the dozens, if not hundreds, of churches around the Bay Area that also served their communities during the same season of service. Think about the communities that were transformed and the tangible evidence of God's love that was communicated.

This is what it means to live in between the times. On the one hand, we want Jesus to return. We want him to bring peace and justice and establish his kingdom. But on the other hand, as I look around, I don't want this to be the end of the story. I want more people to experience the love of Christ. I want to see people given an opportunity to respond to the message of the Gospel. I want the story to continue.

We want to see the Gospel change Palo Alto and Mountain View and Sunnyvale and Los Altos and all the places in which we live. We want to see the Silicon Valley encounter Jesus in a powerful way. That's what is behind the collaborative efforts of Transforming the Bay with Christ. It's what we sense God doing in our community located here in such a unique part of the world.

The great thing about being at a church like ours is that we don't know what that is going to look like yet. I'm not here to unveil some great five year plan to show you how you can participate in the Gospel movement. That's not the way we work. We are the church together. I don't know how God is going to

move you and inspire you and create ideas and opportunities. But I know that he is going to do those things.

That is how God works. When you get a vision for what God is doing in the world and you want to participate, he will give you a way to jump in. Think about the past year and how people participated. Many people stepped up to lead in our Awana program. There is a growing effort to address issues of sexual purity and healing in our midst. We've served our community in practical ways through Beautiful Day. Everywhere I look around here I see God at work.

Don't ask why God isn't doing this or that. Ask what he is doing and then get on board. If you see a need, fill it. God's saving work in the world isn't done. The story of the Gospel is being written day by day through the faithful efforts of those who would follow Jesus and be empowered by His Spirit.

As we wait for Jesus to return, we appreciate the ongoing work of God and we find ways to get involved. Participate in the movement of the Gospel. Ask God what that looks like for you.

Conclusion

This isn't the ending of 2 Thessalonians. Next week Scott will wrap up our series by looking at the final exhortations of the book. But the last phrase in our passage has the sense of finality. The apostle Paul is wrapping up this big idea of the story of the Gospel moving forward. Let's read 2 Thessalonians 3:5, "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ."

This is what I want us to leave with—two things that carry us forward. First, the love of God is why we are here. The central message of the Gospel is that God loves his creation. His love is costly. It is powerful. It is relentless. It is personal. God's love will stop at nothing. He will do everything to extend the invitation of life to his creation. God's love motivates us.

Second, if God's love is our motivation, then the steadfastness of Christ is our inspiration. No one ever held more true to their purpose. No one walked so unwaveringly with God, confident that the purposes of the kingdom were being fulfilled through his actions, even when it looked like the exact opposite. The steady obedience of Christ is our inspiration.

The love of God motivates us. The steadfastness of Christ inspires us.

You will be happy to know that I was able to find the only copy I know of the book that tells the story of the Seablorians. I had forgotten most of the drama until re-reading it. I didn't remember that it tells the story of the complete and final destruction of Seablor, the home of the Seablorians. But in the end, several of these persevering creatures established a new home in the closet of a young girl named Sara.

Listen to the last paragraph of the story:

"The next day at about 2:00 pm, Bellefonte, Elerux, and Rakawood were finished. They had made at least three beds with blankets and everything. They had a real new home that was no one else's but their's and Sara's."

Good stories draw you in and give you hope that there is more to come. That's because all good stories are modeled after the Great Story of the world: the saving work of the Creator God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel movement is an unfinished story. Your story is an unfinished story. Give thanks that God chose you to be a part of it. In the midst of a changing culture, hold firm to the truth of God's revelation and participate in the excitement of the Gospel movement.

(Endnotes)

¹ Burke, Daniel. "Millennials leaving church in droves, study finds." CNN. 14 May 2015. Web.