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2 Thessalonians 2:13 **Did God Choose Whom He Would Save?**

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 Thessalonians 2:13

On September 2, 1855, Charles Haddon (C. H.) Spurgeon, a man who would go down in history as the Prince of Preachers, climbed the steps to the elevated pulpit of New Park Street Chapel, London, to deliver the Sunday sermon. He read 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and told the congregation, “If there were no other text in the sacred Word except this one, I think we should all be bound to receive and acknowledge the truthfulness of the great and glorious doctrine of God’s ancient choice of his family.”

Not all would agree, for though many Calvinists consider 2 Thessalonians 2:13 to be the clearest verse in the Bible on divine election, other Christians understand the verse to have nothing to do with the topic. The Calvinists are interpreting Paul out of context, they say.

Who’s right? Consider first Spurgeon’s interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

A Calvinist’s Interpretation

The first point in Spurgeon’s sermon was that divine election is a true doctrine of the Christian faith. Anglicans, Waldenses, and Baptists all agree, Spurgeon said. To demonstrate this point, he quoted the Anglican Church’s Articles of Faith, the Waldensian Creed, and the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689. Article Three of the latter states:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ to the praise of His glorious grace; others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of His glorious justice. These angels and men thus predestinated and foreordained are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain

and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished. Those of mankind that are predestinated to life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory out of His mere free grace and love without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving him thereunto.

Spurgeon next turned to the Scriptures to demonstrate that divine election was a doctrine with a solid biblical foundation. One by one, he cited Calvinism's proof-texts for election, including: Mark 13:20-27; Luke 18:7; John 15:16; John 17:8-9; Acts 13:48; Romans 8:29-33; Romans 9:11-12; Romans 9:22; Romans 11:5-7; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29; and 1 Thessalonians 5:9. He then turned his focus to 2 Thessalonians 2:13, the primary text of his sermon. From this verse Spurgeon explained that election is absolute, eternal, and personal.

1. Election is Absolute

God's choice of certain sinners for salvation, Spurgeon told his audience, was solely His. Scripture states, "*God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation*" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). God made His choice independent of any good deed or any personal faith that He saw in the elect. For this reason, election is absolute. It is all of God. This is the doctrine of unconditional election, the "U" in Calvinism's TULIP.

2. Election is Eternal

Spurgeon led his audience back in time to before the creation of the universe, before the "stars and constellations fell trickling from the hand of God," "back, back, back, ages upon ages." He took them back to "when the unnavigated ether was yet unfanned by the wing of a single angel," back to "when space was shoreless," to when "there was no being and no motion, no time, and naught but God Himself alone in His eternity." It was then that God chose the elect. In the words of the apostle Paul, He "*chose you from the beginning*" (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

3. Election is Personal

Divine election, Spurgeon continued, does not refer simply to God's choice of the nation of Israel. Neither does it refer to God's choice of Great Britain for special blessing, as many believed in Spurgeon's day. "Our opponents have tried to overthrow election by telling us that it is an election of nations, and not of people," Spurgeon said. "But here the Apostle says, 'God hath from the beginning chosen *you*.'"

4. Election Produces Good Results

In his final sermon point, Spurgeon expressed his concern that some were using the doctrine of divine election as an excuse for sin. "How many are there who have said to themselves," Spurgeon recounted, "I am elect,' and have sat down in sloth, and worse than that! They have said, 'I am the

elect of God,' and with both hands they have done wickedness. They have swiftly run to every unclean thing, because they have said, 'I am the chosen child of God, irrespective of my works, therefore I may live as I list [wish], and do what I like.'" Such people, Spurgeon told his audience, forget that "God chooses His people to be holy and to be believers." Election, properly understood, Spurgeon said, produces good in the lives of the elect. It strips them of reliance on the flesh and humbles them. It also makes them fearless, for they know that they are God's elect.

A Contextual Interpretation

Though hesitant to question the teaching of a preacher as esteemed as C. H. Spurgeon, nevertheless when one looks closely at the transcript of his September 2, 1855, message, it is apparent that something is missing. In his approximately forty-five minute sermon, Spurgeon makes no mention of the context of 2 Thessalonians 2:13. He says nothing about the background of the church in Thessalonica, though much is known from the book of Acts. He makes no reference to the themes or purposes of Paul's two letters to the church there. He doesn't even discuss the immediate context of 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Are we to believe that the context has no bearing on the interpretation of the verse? Consider the following.

The First Christians in Thessalonica

Paul first visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-15). As was his custom, he took the message of salvation first to the Jews of that city. For three Sabbaths, Paul attended the Jewish synagogue, interacted with the people, and "reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). The Greek word *dialegame*, translated here "reasoned," means *to discuss a matter* or *to try to convince someone of something*. We get our English word *dialogue* from this word. Paul spent his time with the Jews of Thessalonica, "explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ'" (Acts 17:3). The Greek word *dianeego*, translated in this verse "explaining," is also interesting. It is a compound word made up of the preposition *through* and the verb *to open*. It means *to open up completely*. Luke uses the word twice in his account of the Lord's appearance to two disciples on the Emmaus road on the day of His resurrection. When the Lord broke bread with them later that evening, Luke writes, "Their eyes *were opened* and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was *explaining* the Scriptures to us?'" (Luke 24:31-32). Paul did the same for the Jews of Thessalonica. He patiently explained to them that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. He gave them "evidence that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead" (Acts 17:3). This is the work of the evangelist: presenting the gospel of salvation from the Scriptures, explaining it, answering questions, and providing the necessary evidence that sinners might repent and believe.

Paul's efforts bore fruit. Luke writes, "And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women"

(Acts 17:4). Here Luke uses yet another interesting word: “persuaded.” This is the translation of the Greek word *peitho*, meaning *to have confidence* or *to be persuaded*. Having listened to Paul’s explanation of the Scriptures and having examined his evidence for Jesus being the Christ, some were persuaded that Paul was right. Significantly, the New Testament word for *to believe* (Greek: *pisteno*) is derived from this same word. To have faith, in a biblical sense, is to be persuaded that something is true. More specifically, to have *saving* faith is to be persuaded that the gospel is true, *that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that He died for our sins and rose again on the third day*.

Those Jews who were persuaded that what Paul was teaching was true “joined Paul and Silas” (Acts 17:4), or, more literally, they *threw in their lot with them*. Others also believed, “a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women” (Acts 17:4). The result was the establishment of the first church in Thessalonica.

Such being the experience of the Thessalonian Christians, it is unlikely that upon receiving Paul’s second letter and reading 2 Thessalonians 2:13 that they would have understood the verse to mean that their salvation was all of God and devoid of the need for any meaningful decision on their part. To the contrary, they would have had vivid memories of Paul’s long hours of persuasive reasoning from Scripture, their grappling with the truths that he had presented, their weighing of the cost of professing faith in Christ, and finally their decision to throw in their lots with him. Paul summarizes their reception of his message as occurring “in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). That is how they would have remembered it as well.

Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians

Shortly after leaving Thessalonica, Paul wrote two letters to the believers there. We know these letters as First Thessalonians and Second Thessalonians. The theme of Paul’s first letter is godly living in view of the Lord’s second coming. In the opening chapters, he reviews how the Thessalonians received the gospel with heartfelt enthusiasm, became imitators of Paul and of the Lord, believed the gospel, and endured persecution at the hands of their countrymen.

In chapter four of his letter, Paul addresses a question the Thessalonians had concerning the future of Christians who had died, or—as New Testament writers often speak of death, because of its temporary nature for believers—Christians who had “fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:15). Apparently, the Thessalonians were concerned about what would become of their deceased Christian family and friends when Christ returned to receive the church, the bride of Christ, from the earth. Would their deceased friends miss out on this event? Paul assured them that they would not. He explains,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to

meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

In the next verse, 1 Thessalonians 5:1, Paul describes what will take place after Christ receives the church from the earth. Paul signals this shift in topic with the words *peri de*, Greek for “now as to” or “now concerning,” a two word transition that he often uses in his letters to introduce new topics (1 Corinthians 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:9). The passage reads:

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness;

1 Thessalonians 5:1-5

Here Paul explains that after the rapture of the church, the day of the Lord will come. It will be a time of unprecedented tribulation, the Lord’s judgment of those still alive on earth. Scripture describes it as a period of destruction, terror, anguish, and death. Isaiah writes, “The day of the Lord is coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; and He will exterminate its sinners from it” (Isaiah 13:9). Fortunately for Christians living in the last days, Christ will take them off the earth prior to the start of the day of the Lord, as Paul explains in the previous verses.

Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians

A short time after Paul sent his first letter to the Thessalonians, he learned that the church there was confused as to the timing of the coming of the Lord, the rapture of the church, and the day of the Lord. Apparently, someone had led them to believe that the day of the Lord was upon them and that Christians were going to have to go through the great tribulation after all. Making matters worse, some were claiming that Paul had changed his beliefs and was now teaching that Christians would have to endure the judgments of the day of the Lord.

Paul responded with a second letter to set the record straight. After some initial greetings and words of encouragement, Paul writes:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-

called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5

Here Paul explains that not only had the day of the Lord not begun, it could not begin until two other events in biblical prophecy had taken place. The first was “the apostasy” (2 Thessalonians 2:3), the great *falling away* or *defection* from the Christian faith that would occur in the end times and precede God’s judgment on earth. Paul describes this falling away in his first letter to Timothy, writing, “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). Since this great apostasy had yet to occur, Paul is arguing, the Thessalonians should know that the day of the Lord had not begun. It was still future.

The other significant event that had to occur before the day of the Lord could begin was the revelation of “the man of lawlessness . . . the son of destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Daniel refers to him as “the prince who is to come” (Daniel 9:26). John calls him the “antichrist” (1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7) and the “beast” (Revelation 13:1-18). The day of the Lord would not begin—indeed it could not begin—until this evil person had been revealed. Paul explains why.

And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

2 Thessalonians 2:6-10

“He who now restrains” is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit. Dwelling within each true Christian, the Holy Spirit has been keeping Satan and the rise of the antichrist in check. When the Holy Spirit “is taken out of the way” (2 Thessalonians 2:7), a reference to the rapture of the church, “then that lawless one will be revealed” (2 Thessalonians 2:8). What follows will be a time of horrific evil on earth. The antichrist will take “his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (2 Thessalonians 2:4). With power from Satan, he will display great “power and signs and false wonders” (2 Thessalonians 2:9). The Lord will respond in judgment and pour out the “the seven bowls of the wrath of God” (Revelation 16:1). Included in God’s end time judgments will be “the deception of wickedness for those who perish” (2 Thessalonians 2:10). Paul writes: “God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

2 Thessalonians 2:13

We now come to the verse under consideration, the text for Spurgeon’s sermon on election. Before reading it again, load your mind with the immediate context—Paul has been telling the Thessalonians that they are mistaken in their thinking about the day of the Lord. It has not begun and it cannot begin until the apostasy comes and the antichrist is revealed. Then God will send a “deluding influence” upon the earth, so that those who had rejected the gospel “might believe what is false.” In this context Paul writes:

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 Thessalonians 2:13

Note the change in focus. Paul introduces the verse with the word “but,” communicating that what follows stands in contrast to what has gone before. He is no longer speaking about those “who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:12), but is speaking directly to his Christian readers, whom he addresses as “brethren beloved by the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul writes, “We should always give thanks to God for you.” Why? “Because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). The interpretation of this verse hinges on the intended meaning of “salvation.” To what is Paul referring? Or, to state it another way, *Salvation from what?*

In answering this question, it is important to note that the word translated “salvation” (Greek *soteria*) is from a root meaning *safe* or *well*. It carries with it the ideas of *perseverance*, *rescue*, and *deliverance*. New Testament writers use the word with reference to deliverance from the eternal punishment of sin (Acts 4:12), enemies (Luke 1:71), prison (Philippians 1:19), the flood of Noah’s day (Hebrews 11:7), a storm at sea (Acts 27:34), and other things. So, when Paul writes, “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation” (2 Thessalonians 2:13), we must ask: Salvation from what? How would the Thessalonians have understood Paul’s statement?

The context is the key to unlocking the meaning of 2 Thessalonians 2:13. First of all, it is helpful to recognize what the context is *not*. It is not about “the great and glorious doctrine of God’s ancient choice of his family,” as Spurgeon claims in the introduction to his sermon. Neither is it about who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. It is not about God’s role in salvation versus man’s role in salvation. It’s not about the doctrines of election, predestination, or justification. Paul is not talking about any of these things.

What *is* Paul talking about? Or, more specifically, *From what will God save the Thessalonian Christians?* From the things about which Paul has been speaking: “the day of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 2:2), “the apostasy” (2 Thessalonians 2:3), “the son of destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:3), “the mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thessalonians 2:7), “the activity of Satan” (2 Thessalonians 2:9), “the deception of wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:10), and the “deluding influence” (2

Thessalonians 2:11). God has chosen to deliver the church from these things.

When did God choose to save the church from these things? “From the beginning” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). It was part of God’s original plan to deliver the body of Christ from end time evil and the great tribulation.

Whom has God chosen to save from the evil of the end times? The Christian readers of Paul’s letter, the “you” of 2 Thessalonians 2:13, also referred to in that verse as Paul’s “brethren.”

Why has God chosen to save the Thessalonian Christians from the evil of the end times? Because they are “beloved by the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). As the redeemed in Christ, the Father loves them even as He loves His Son. Jesus told His disciples, “The Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father” (John 16:27). For this reason, the promise of 2 Thessalonians 2:13 is applicable to all true Christians, to all who are “beloved by the Lord.”

How will God save Christians from the evil of the End Times? He will accomplish their deliverance “through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Believers must yield their lives to the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit and trust the truths and promises of God’s Word. Through these means, God will deliver them from evil. This would be true of Paul’s targeted readers—the Thessalonian Christians, who were already facing considerable evil—and true of all Christians after them, especially those living in the last days.

Conclusion

Though Spurgeon undoubtedly preached a powerful and persuasive sermon that Sunday morning in 1855, eloquence is no substitute for accuracy. A man who stands before a congregation and opens the Scriptures to speak on behalf of God is responsible to teach the intended meaning of the divine author. This requires careful attention to context. Here Spurgeon fell short. In his 9,000 word sermon—this article isn’t even half that length—there is not a word about the context of 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Yes, this was an aberration in an otherwise stellar career. Who has not benefited from his otherwise excellent teaching and spiritual insight? Yet sadly, it is all too common for the proponents of Calvinism, when speaking on election and predestination, to cite one verse after another with total disregard for context. Convinced that their theological system is correct, they are content with quoting verses that say what they want them to say when interpreted in isolation.