

Alf will be helping us to open up this passage a little bit later in the service, but we're going to read it now.

[Reading 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17]

The church in troubled times. We're going through a series looking at 2 Thessalonians and what Paul is telling to this church in trouble times in Thessalonica. We heard about "Praying through trials" (Crispin brought that to us), last week we saw "God's power revealed" (Steve brought that to us), today we have "Strengthened to do right", and next week we go on to the end of that particular letter.

There's something in the air tonight, something in the breeze whistling round the chimney stacks, rustling through the trees, can you feel it? Can you feel it? It just gives the impression that something is happening in the church. After two years of being locked away, in one sense, we're now having to find new ways of delivering the message, but you just get the feeling that there's something going on in the church. Steve says that people have been saying "Why don't we sing the old hymns?" I've noticed that the old hymns are coming back. Down at New Life (watch their worship usually on a Sunday morning) and my own daughter's church, Grace Vineyard Purley, and even here as well we sing the old hymns because the old hymns have something solid to say. There's one particular chorus that they sing, or have sung, that contains the line, or the words, "Sloppy wet kiss with regard to God." Well, come on! We know what it means, we know what it means: he is our father, a loving father. But you think with certain choruses, couldn't you have tried harder?

As Steve was telling us these letters to the Thessalonians were the first of Paul's letters - we're almost certain of that. Written about 50 AD, which is about 20 years after Jesus lived and died, and they were a church who felt and believed that Jesus Christ was coming back in power very soon. And actually in the first letter, 1 Thessalonians, the end of each chapter mentions the second coming of Christ, because as we say at Easter: Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again. And he did even die, and he did rise from the dead, and for 40 days he taught his disciples: what it all meant, what his ministry meant - it wasn't just telling lovely little parables and stories, and healing people, that there was a reason, there was a work that he came to do.

He returned to heaven, and this Thursday is Ascension Day (just in case you didn't know that) - 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead, he was talking to his disciples and then ascended, ascended up to go back to his Father, and that happens this Thursday. And 10 days after that, he sent the Holy Spirit. He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower his followers, and he sent them out to spread the resurrection message throughout the known world. We know that when Jesus was talking to his disciples that he said "Wait in Jerusalem, wait for the promise of the Father - just wait - because you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the utter most parts of the Earth, spreading the resurrection message throughout the known world." What on earth is left?

What on earth was left? But, as we know, in 2022 it was not in the Father's plan to send his Son back in power so soon, because there was a lot of work to be done, there was a lot of known and unknown world to reach with the Good News. So these Thessalonian Christians, they just felt that Jesus was coming back, and they expected him any day, but we know that God's plan is that Jesus

will come – one just feels: are we in the last days now? Of course there have been so many last days when people have felt the Jesus surely must come back, but surely all the signs: wars and rumours of wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilences, floods. What on earth is left?

So what did Paul want to remind the Thessalonian Christians of, and what does he want to remind us of? Now we've looked through the service at the passage that we are looking at, bringing out some great points, and I just want to touch back on them.

Firstly, we are loved by God.

“And we always ought to thank God for you,” says Paul, “brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord, because God chose you as first fruits from beginning to be saved, to the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” We are loved by the Lord. And one of my favourite verses, from 1 John 3:1, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called 'Children of God', and that is what we are.”

Now, I apologise, because I'm going to speak some Greek because I like what the Greek says here, and from the old version: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us to be called the 'Children of God'”, and the Greek says: “And we are!” Translators may end “that is what we are”, but the Greek says that God showed his love by showing that we are his children, and we are! No ifs, no ands, no buts – we *are* God's children. It's an expression of God's love.

Paul in Romans: “Whenever we cry 'Abba, father' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are Children of God,” and we are. That's something we just have to hold on, you have to grab hold of and hold onto, because sometimes, I don't know, sometimes we're tempted: do we really have a relationship with God? Is he really our heavenly Father? Well, yes he is! He is our heavenly Father because we are his children.

Firstly, Paul showed that we are loved by God. Secondly we're chosen by God.

From the beginning God chose you to be saved. “That we always ought to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord because God chose you from the beginning,” or as first fruits, taking another translation of the Greek words, “to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” From the beginning God chose you to be saved, and the word really means, “choose with delight or love”. It wasn't a case of “who shall I choose? Oh, they'll do. They'll do. Steve will do. Crispin will do. Neil will do.” No, God chose us – chose us with delight and love. He delighted to choose us to be saved, for he – from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he was talking to the Ephesian Christians – for he, God the Father, chose us in him, Christ Jesus, before the foundation of the world and predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ.

I don't know whether you have any problems with free will or predestination, it's an arguing point, but the two are correct. We are predestined to freely choose to have that relationship with God – we freely choose to have a relationship that God has predestined for us before the beginning of time. And it's important to understand that God is outside of time – it's a very difficult concept, we're bound by time: yesterday, today, tomorrow, what you're going to be doing next week (we just had that section). But God is, he's above it all; remember that he said to Moses from the burning bush, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Not “I am, I was, I will be.” God is the Great I am.

Whatever is happening to us next week, he's there. Whatever was happening to us yesterday, he was there. Whatever is happening in our hearts today, he's there. Because he's outside of time. So have no problems about free will or predestination – they're both correct.

Firstly we're loved by God. Secondly we're chosen by God. And thirdly we're called by God.

"But we ought always thank God for you, brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord, because God chose you as first fruits," or from the beginning, "to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and through belief in the truth. He called you to this, through our Gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." He called you through our Gospel that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Called. We are called by God. An invitation to the duties, privileges and bliss of the Christian life here and hereafter. I think I'll repeat that, it's rather good, isn't it: an invitation to the duties, privileges and bliss of the Christian life here and hereafter. And thinking of calling, I thought of the calling of the first disciples: Jesus walking along the lake side and finding Simon and Andrew struggling with their nets in the boat, and said "Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men." And then going further on he saw those sons of Zebedee, James and John, and he called them: "Follow me."

"Follow me." he wasn't sort of getting a bunch of buddies together, you know, "huh, it's going to be a bit lonely going round healing people and teaching, I need a few friends round me; who can I choose? Oh, they'll do!" No it was he prayed, in John 17, thanking God for those who God has given him, those that God the father gave him before time began to follow.

I'm sure "Lord of the Dance" is a good song, a nice song, but for me it just gives the impression of Jesus as a kind of Pied Piper piping away and the disciples are following on. No it was "Follow me!" Get invested in the ministry, understand what it's all about, understand why I came, understand why I died, why I rose from the dead, why I explained to you why I'm going back to the Father, why I'm sending the Holy Spirit to be in you and working with you. So this call is not to follow Jesus just, and I suppose there can be that temptation, can't there? We're following Jesus; well your life doesn't say so (I'm not talking about anybody here), but it is possible for someone can say "I'm a follower of Jesus." Well, I think it should show in your life, you know.

We are loved by God, we are chosen by God, we are called by God. And lastly Paul wants to remind us that we must stand firm. But we always ought to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, love by the Lord because God chose you as first fruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our Gospel that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth, or by letter.

Stand firm and hold on to the teachings we passed on to you. Stand firm means be established, confirmed, enduring in a permanent position. We know what standing firm means. Remember Paul writing to the Ephesian Christians when he talks about the armour of God. "When the devil comes against you stand firm against him, and after you have done everything to stand." Fighting to a standstill.

Fighting to a standstill. We just think of the situation in Russia and Ukraine. We don't know what the end is going to be, we don't know what the news is, we don't know where Russia is in dominance and where there are they holding back, but the Ukrainians and their president said "Stand. Stand firm. And after you've done everything, stand." Now, I suddenly thought that if we know what we stand for, we'll know what we fall for.

If we know what we stand for, we'll know what we fall for. If we're standing firm then we know why we're standing firm, and we know that if we don't stand firm what the result of that will be.

And Paul wants to remind us, and remind the Thessalonian Christians. Stand firm – you're going to experience tribulation, you're going to experience problems, you're going to experience persecution, but stand firm and hold to the teachings; and for me that's a very important part: stand firm – yes, but hold to the teachings, hold to the scriptures.

Somebody once, one preacher waving his black leather clad floppy Bible (as you have to have as a preacher) said “I believe in the Bible from cover to cover including the covers!” Well, it's not a bad attitude to take. We have to know what we believe, you have to know what the scriptures say.

I was telling Crispin that the story is that during the second World War when the men went off to war some pastors went off either to fight or to be chaplains, and left the ladies behind, one lady preacher said “I just have a sermon in three points: What the Bible says, What the Bible means, and What the Bible means to us.” Can't say fairer than that! We need to know our Bible.

But we ought always thank God for you, brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord because God chose you as first fruits (or from the beginning) to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this, to our Gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

And this passage ends “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father who loved us and by his Grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

Now I have, some people have a spell checker, I have a sermon checker: she's called Rachel, my daughter (who you know she drums, she's an excellent drummer/percussionist and has other musical skills as well), and I've taken recently to letting her see the notes of the sermons and saying “what do you think?” She says “Don't say that...don't say that...cut that out...end with that”. She's my sermon checker. And she said that the best thing to end with is this phrase: “We need to know what we believe, and we need to believe what we know.” Amen