

Hold Fast to the Gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13-17)

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New York Times bestseller “Indianapolis” by Lynn Vincent and Sara Vladic, recounts “The greatest sea disaster in the history of the American Navy.” In the prologue, they write:

“By the summer of 1945, the Pacific war was churning toward its fiery climax. A new weapon had been born, a ‘destroyer of worlds.’ During the last week of July, under the command of Captain Charles B. McVay III, Indianapolis delivered the core of this weapon to its launch point, completing the most highly classified naval mission of the war. Four days later, just after midnight, a Japanese submarine spotted Indy and struck her with two torpedoes. Three hundred men went down with the ship. As Indy sank into the yawning underwater canyons of the Philippine Sea, nearly nine hundred men made it into the water alive. Only 316 survived.”

Much of the rest of the story details their harrowing account of survival with little to no food or water, scorching sun, and sudden attacks from circling sharks. After coughing fuel oil out of their burning lungs or attempting to wipe it out of blinded eyes, the most fortunate among them managed to swim to an inflatable lifeboat, a floating net, or group of fellow sailors bobbing in life jackets and held on for dear life. You don’t survive in those conditions by treading water for the four days it took the Navy to realize the Indianapolis had been sunk and begin a rescue mission. You need something or someone to hold onto.

The saddest part is that some who initially held on eventually let go. Fear of being mangled by a shark, hallucinations, or a sudden urge to look for food or water caused more than a few to strike off on their own in the ocean. They didn’t return. They lost their physical life because they failed to hold fast to the one thing that could save their life.

Friends, the same principle is true in a spiritual sense. There is a danger far greater than 4 days in shark-infested water. It’s the peril of sin. Paul’s second letter to the church in Thessalonica reminds us that a day of divine judgment for every human being who has ever lived is fast-approaching.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, The Lord Jesus will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the

punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." Why will so many perish on that day and are perishing even now? 2 Thessalonians 2:10, "Because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." Or as Paul concludes in 2 Thessalonians 2:12, they "did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Because God created us, we are accountable to him.

We have only one hope for salvation. It's not found in trying to be a better you. It's not found in trying to be better than the people around you. It's not found in creating your own meaning in life or in deciding there is no meaning and attempting to make the best of it. The gospel of Jesus Christ is our only hope for salvation. Therefore, hold fast to the gospel and refuse to let go.

It's what Paul sternly charged the Thessalonians to do. It's what God, through his inerrant Word, charges us to do today.

Hold fast to the gospel because it is our only hope for salvation.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17, the Lord teaches us several ways to do that.

1) GIVE THANKS FOR THE SAVING POWER OF THE GOSPEL (Verses 13-14)

The contrast between verse 12 and verse 13 is both striking and deliberate. Who will be condemned on the day Christ returns? All who "did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Verse 13, "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..." The former group is condemned by the Lord. The latter are saved by the Lord.

What explains the difference? Well, what's the opposite of not believing the truth and taking pleasure in unrighteousness? Believing the truth and taking pleasure in righteousness, right? So we expect Paul to say, "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because you believe the truth and take pleasure in righteousness. But he doesn't say that.

What does he say? Who does he credit for the fact that the brothers and sisters in the church in Thessalonica will be saved on the day of judgment and not



condemned? He credits the activity of God which is why he gives thanks to God! Notice the asymmetry. We, not God, are ultimately responsible for our condemnation, but God, not us, is ultimately responsible for our salvation.

Listen to me, friend. If you saved, if you are rescued, if you are vindicated and justified in the courtroom of heaven on that final day, it will not ultimately be because of anything you have done. It will ultimately be because of something God has done for you. He chose you. What does it mean for God to choose someone for salvation? It means that in eternity past, due to no merit of your own, before you have done anything good or bad, God resolved in his infinite mercy to deliver you from the judgment you would otherwise deserve on account of your sins.

He didn't peer into the future and see a decent person. He didn't look down the corridor of time and notice that if you were presented with the truth of the gospel you would choose to respond in faith and repentance. He purposed, he resolved, in the perfect freedom of his sovereign will, to bring about your salvation. He chose to make you the object of his redeeming love by uniting you to his eternally beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:3-4, "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him..."

If you're a Christian, when you find yourself in the quiet of your own mind observing the world around you, observing other people in your family, observing other people at your work, and searching for a way to explain the difference, take heed lest you conclude, "It must be because of my hard work. I must be because of my self-control. It must be because of my spiritual wisdom and understanding. It must be because of my morality, my uprightness, or my family legacy."

Do not be so arrogant, friend. There is not a single man or woman in this room who would ever choose God if God had not first chosen you. The ultimate cause of our salvation is the mercy of God in election. That's not a cause for pride. That's a cause for deep humility and tearful gratitude.

Now consider the means of our salvation. How does the Lord effect his saving work in our lives? Verse 13, "God chose you...to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth."



When the Bible talks about salvation, it doesn't always speak like we speak. We usually speak of whether someone has been "saved" in the past. By that we mean, "Was there a point in time in your life where you repented of your sins, where you turned from living for yourself, and turned toward trusting and obeying Jesus, believing that his death on the cross is sufficient to atone for all your transgressions – past, present, and future?"

Making that decision is critical, friend. It's a matter of life and death. But the Bible also speaks of your salvation, Christian, as something God is doing in your life in the present as he delivers us time and time again from sin and evil, making us more like Jesus, and will bring to completion in the future when we are vindicated on the final day of judgment, holy as Jesus himself is holy. In the context of 2 Thessalonians 2, it's the future day, the final day of salvation, that Paul primarily has in view.

And being saved, not condemned, on that final day requires far more than having a "moment" where we "get right" with God. Attaining the hope of heaven, experiencing salvation on that day, requires walking the path of salvation in this day. Salvation isn't just a spiritual status we achieve at the beginning of the Christian journey. It's a spiritual reward we receive at the end of the Christian journey.

And that journey, the path of salvation, is marked by two things.

First, "sanctification by the Spirit." The Apostle Paul makes abundantly clear in his first letter to the Thessalonians that personal holiness is necessary for salvation on the final day. 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Thessalonians 4:7, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you."

The great difference between those whom God saved under the Old Covenant and those whom God saves under the New Covenant is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Were the Israelites called to pursue holiness? Yes. Did their salvation depend on walking the path of holiness? Yes. Are we called to pursue holiness? Yes. Does our salvation depend on walking the path of holiness? Yes. Yet every Christian today has something the saints of old did not. The Holy Spirit lives in us. And he is what? The Holy Spirit upon who works in our hearts to make us holy as he is holy.



That progressive work is what the Bible calls sanctification. And unless you are sanctified, friend, you will not be saved – not because your sanctification earns your salvation, but because the path of final salvation consists of sanctification and requires sanctification such that we will not be saved unless we are sanctified.

At every point in your life, Christian, you must pay careful attention to how the Holy Spirit is working to make you more like Jesus. And if you're not sure or think you've pretty much got the holiness thing under wraps, just ask a friend or your spouse where they think you need to grow. Make that a regular practice. God may work in mysterious ways, but the way he is on the move, seeking to make us more like Jesus, is usually not a mystery to those who know us best. Be humble and ask them – "How do you think the Spirit is working to sanctify me right now?" And then ask how they think you can cooperate with his work!

Second, the path of salvation is marked by belief in the truth. That's not a personal truth, what's true in my own eyes. It's not a truth of our own making. To believe in the truth is to believe in Jesus. Why? Because he is the one in whom the God of truth has most fully revealed himself and self-consciously so. John 14:6, "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." If you want to know what is true, listen to Jesus.

Why? Because Jesus tells us what we must do to be saved by explaining the gospel. What's the gospel? It's the good news of all Jesus has done to accomplish salvation for mankind. The gospel tells us we are sinners. We deserve death. The gospel also tells us Jesus is a great Savior. He died on the cross and rose from the grave so that all your trust and obey him could receive the gift of eternal life. If you don't believe that – not in the sense of mental acknowledgment, but in the sense of wholehearted reliance – you will not be saved.

As Paul says in verse 14, through the declaration of the gospel God calls sinners like us to salvation, to turn from our sin and embrace the obedience of faith. Belief in the truth is the faith part. Being sanctified by the Spirit is the obedience part. In other words, believing in Jesus and becoming more like Jesus go hand in hand. They are together what the gospel calls us to embrace – the obedience of faith.

So God's mercy in election is the cause of our salvation. Sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth is the means of our salvation. But don't miss the final goal of our salvation. Verse 14, "To this he called you through our gospel, so that on the



day of judgment you won't have anything to worry about." No! So that "you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We don't think often enough about where the path of salvation ends. It doesn't end with a get-out-of-jail-free. It ends with you, Christian, becoming glorious as Jesus is glorious. Who is Jesus? The eternal Son of God who took on human flesh. He is the second Adam. The true Israel. He shows us what it means to be fully and completely human.

So what is the eternal destiny, the final goal of your salvation of all who are found in Him? It's the image of God in you fully and completely restored. One day, Christian, you will be morally and ethically righteous as Jesus is righteous. The Spirit's work of sanctification in your life will be complete. You will perfectly reflect the glory of God in the same way your older brother Jesus perfectly reflects the glory of God.

Oh, what day that will be! No more apologies. No more confessions. No more broken relationships. No more unintentional sin. No more intentional sin. We will see Jesus, we will be like Jesus, and we will enjoy Jesus forever. How should we respond to all this? Verse 13, "We ought always to give thanks to God..." Give thanks for what? For the saving power of the gospel – for the cause of our salvation, for the means of our salvation, and for the final goal of our salvation.

The first way we hold fast to the gospel is by giving thanks for the saving power of the gospel – the cause, means, and final goal included. Pay attention to what you're grateful for, friend. If your deepest gratitude, your greatest joy, is found in something other than what Jesus has done for you, you've taken the first step to letting go of the gospel. Failure to hold fast to the gospel never begins with outright denial. It begins with diminished gratitude. All that Jesus has done for us just starts to seem rather ordinary and uninteresting.

If you see that tendency in your own heart, you need to do two things. First, ask God to forgive you for taking his salvation for granted. Second, ask an older Christian what they have done to sustain and deepen their gratitude for the gospel. Most likely, you'll find the "secret" isn't complicated. It's the result of diligent study and meditation on the beauty of Jesus in the pages of his Word. If we're going to hold fast to the gospel, we need to pay careful attention to our gratitude for the gospel.

2) BUILD YOUR LIFE ON THE ENDURING TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL (Verse 15)

Pay careful attention to the very beginning of verse 15. “So then, brothers,” Paul says. That tells us what? That he’s making a connection, he’s identifying an implication, of all he said in verses 13-14. If the gospel promises we will not fail to “obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And if the electing love of God and the effectual call of God guarantee as much. Then the Thessalonians should not be afraid that the day of the Lord has come, Jesus has already returned, and somehow they missed out on it.

Verse 15 reaches all the way back to verse 2. “We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit of a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.” What’s the opposite of being “quickly shaken in mind or alarmed”? Verse 15, “Stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”

Paul’s basically telling the Thessalonians, “Listen, guys. If you think something is true or someone tells you something is true and it does not line up with the truth of the gospel, don’t believe it. Instead, hold fast to the gospel. Trust the promises God has made in the gospel, including the promise that you won’t miss out on the day of the Lord.” Friends, the underlying principle here couldn’t be more relevant for us.

There are so many voices inside of us and around us that lie to us by presenting an alternate form of salvation to the gospel. For example, if you feel a sexual desire, you should act on that sexual desire, because fulfilling your sexual desires is the key to joy. In contrast, what does the gospel say? The gospel reminds us that we are accountable to God because he’s our Creator. He created all manner of desires, including sexual desire, which means sex as designed by God is incredibly good.

The gospel also reminds us that all our desires have been corrupted by sin. That’s why we need a Savior! Thus we approach our sexual desires with neither categorical disdain nor categorical acceptance. Rather, we test our sexual desires in keeping with God’s Word and submit them to the lordship of the Savior who purchased our bodies for himself at the cost of his own blood.

Notice how I’m not limiting the gospel to a set of historical facts – Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus rose from the grave. Did Jesus live, die, and rise from the grave? Yes. Are the facts of the gospel historical realities in the fullest sense of the word? Yes. But the gospel isn’t a mere set of historical facts. The historical facts of the gospel also make an ethical claim on our lives.



In other words, when Paul says, “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught,” he doesn’t just mean, “Keep believing that the Eternal Son of God took on human flesh, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross to rescue you from sin and death.” If you’re a Christian, you believe those historical facts. If you don’t, you’re not a Christian. But holding fast to the traditions Paul taught them, first and foremost the truth of the gospel in verse 14, also includes holding fast to the ethical implications of those historical facts, including the claim Jesus life, death, and resurrection makes on our sexuality.

All of that, and a thousand other claims the gospel makes on our money, our entertainment choices, the way we think and relate to people from another race or culture, is bound up in the “traditions that you were taught.” We need to hold fast to both the facts of the gospel and the implications of the gospel.

Next to losing our gratitude for the saving power of the gospel, the most significant way we can fail to hold fast to the gospel is by growing lazy in wrestling with the practical implications of the gospel in every area of our lives – parenting, relationships, financial management, you name it. Here again, we see the danger doesn’t begin with denying the deity of Christ or denying his resurrection. It begins with far more subtle pitfalls, like deciding we’ll give more weight to what we feel is true about our bodies than what the gospel says is true about our bodies.

It’s not about being conservative. Or being Republican. No. When Paul says, “hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us,” he’s not telling us idolize the public morality of the 1950s. He’s reminding us of several really important things.

First, the fact that we must be taught what is true reminds us that truth isn’t something we construct for ourselves. It’s something we discover in Christ as we walk the path of salvation the gospel marks out for us. It’s something God reveals to us.

Second, our faith is intrinsically Word-centered. Notice how the Thessalonians were taught the tradition of the gospel. It was through (verse 15) “spoken word” and “letter.” We live in a video age. I like videos. You can learn much from videos. But God doesn’t reveal the truth of the gospel to us today through a video. He reveals the truth of the gospel to us through a book, through his Word.

That’s why spending time studying and getting to know your Bible on your own, in addition to hearing the Word preached on Sunday morning is so critical. It’s also

why we give the singing, reading, praying, and preaching of the Word are, without apology, our highest priorities for the weekly gathering of the church. We want the word of Christ, as Paul says in Colossians 3:16, to dwell in us richly, as we teach and admonish one another.

Standing firm in the midst of a broken world and having genuine hope and help to offer fellow strugglers, Requires that we “hold fast” to the gospel, KingsWay. Not just in our Statement of Faith, but in the ethical choices we make in our lives. Jeremiah 6:16, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’” If we’re going to hold fast to the gospel, we need to pay careful attention to our choices – are you building your life on the enduring truth of the gospel or not?

3) SET YOUR HOPE ON THE WORK GOD IS DOING THROUGH THE GOSPEL (Verses 16-17)

Paul’s example in the concluding prayer of verses 16-17 provokes me. You would expect after a rousing admonition to “stand firm” and “hold fast” to the gospel, the apostle might pray, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who love us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, empower you to not shift from the hope of the gospel.” That would be a good, right, and eminently biblical thing to pray.

But Paul doesn’t do that – at least not here. With the Thessalonians, he seizes the opportunity to model through his own example of prayer yet another way we hold fast to the truth of the gospel. He expresses his abiding confidence in the work the Lord is doing in the Thessalonians through the gospel.

Verses 16-17, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.” In the original language, there are two subjects (God the Son and God the Father), but the verbs loved and gave are singular, pointing to the unity of Father and Son in the work of redemption. Working together, Father and Son gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace – all the blessings and promises of the gospel.

But that raises an important question. If God had already given (in the past) the Thessalonians eternal comfort and good hope, why pray that God would comfort and establish the Thessalonians? It seems like Paul’s asking God to do something



for the Thessalonians that he already did, to give them something they already have! What do we make of that?

If you think carefully about the great struggle of the Christian life, Paul's prayer actually isn't surprising at all. What has God given us in Christ? Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. All we need for life and godliness. So why are we still struggling with sin? Why are we not yet holy as he is holy? Because while God has already given us all the spiritual comfort and good hope we could ever want or need, we have yet to fully appropriate it. We have yet to fully rest in it. So we get anxious. We grow fearful. We become weary. Our hearts are prone to wander.

Which means we need what? We need the Lord to take the promises of the gospel and apply them to our hearts in a personal way that meets us in all the particulars of life. We need God to give us comfort in Christ when our hearts are hurting in the midst of unexplainable suffering and evil. We need God to give us strength in Christ when our hearts are failing in the battle with besetting sin, whether in word or deed.

How good it is to know, friends, that we serve a God who doesn't just dump the blessings of the gospel in our lap and say, "Alright, now get on with it. Walk that path of salvation." No, he cares for us, patiently, gently, persistently, taking one little bit of who he is for us in Jesus and showing us how that connects to a specific challenge in our life. In other words, he doesn't just give us the gospel. He applies the gospel to our hearts. He takes all that is true because of Jesus and works it deep into the fabric of our souls.

Must we hold fast to the gospel? Yes. But don't hope in your work, friend. Hope in God. He will accomplish his work through your work. He will hold fast to you by enabling you to hold fast to him. But remember it's ultimately his work. He's the one who comforts us. We can't comfort ourselves. He's the one who establishes us in every good work and word. We can't do that for ourselves.

Think of it this way. Does every Christian need to hold fast in order to be saved? Yes. When we struggle or someone else we love is struggling to hold fast, where do we focus our attention? On what we're doing or not doing? On what they're doing or not doing? No, we direct our attention, we fix our hope on the work God is doing in bringing the gospel to bear in our lives. If we're going to hold fast to the gospel, we need to pay careful attention to the location of our hope.



CONCLUSION

Hold fast to the gospel because it is our only hope for salvation. Give thanks for the saving power of the gospel. Build your life on the enduring truth of the gospel. And set your hope fully on the work God is doing through the gospel. Holding fast isn't a mystery. It's not an abstract idea. It couldn't be more practical. Let's pray and ask for God's help to do it together.