

Gospel Shaped Church (3) – Loved, Chosen & Shaped by the Gospel

1 Thessalonians 1:4-7

Let's continue where we left off a few weeks ago. V4 **"For we know brothers loved by God.** Loved by God... We shouldn't rush by these phrases & miss their significance for our lives & calling as Christians. Each one is full of meaning & has the potential to enrich our lives & help us know & encounter Christ more deeply. I have learned to read, study & preach the Bible like I would Clew Bay... It's spectacular to climb Croagh Patrick at times to get the full view, but it's equally important to come down again & discover all the gems up close. Our Bible is filled with the unsearchable riches of Christ & the Holy Spirit is our tour guide who has come to guide us to all truth. Revelation doesn't come by sitting waiting on it dropping from the sky into our heads. Revelation comes by digging into God's Word with the help of the Holy Spirit. When we view the big picture we see his glory & when we come down to phrases like this one we discover more of his endless riches.

I read this yesterday & had to add it in; *"You will never be more than - loved by God. Because nothing that you are or will be, will ever be greater than that truth. Lest we try & think anything more of ourselves or anything less. For in this truth we have all we will ever need. No additions are needed. For His love, it is holy love. And in it, only, can we be whole."*

For we know brothers loved by God that he has chosen you." Or as the NKJV puts it; **"knowing beloved brethren, your election by God"**. Let those words rest in your mind & heart today – brothers loved by God (beloved), chosen (elected) by him. The wonderful but difficult Biblical doctrine of God's electing love; let us not explain it away. John Stott comments;

"To whatever denomination or tradition we may belong, the doctrine of election causes us difficulties & questions. To be sure, it is a truth that runs through Scripture, beginning with God's call to Abraham & later his choice of Israel 'out of all the nations' to be his 'treasured possession... a kingdom of priests & a holy nation'. This vocabulary is deliberately transferred in the NT to the Christian community."

Let's look at some examples - Rom 8:28-30, 33; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; Tit 1:1. Peter opens his first letter by referencing & of course Jesus said to his disciples **"you did not choose me but I choose you..."**

Ephesians 1:4-5 tells us **"He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless in him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will."**

This means what it says! God loved us from before the creation of the world. He made us the focus of his love long before we drew our first breath. In fact Jeremiah tells us that God has loved us with an everlasting love! Christ's love for us began before time, way back in eternity. That's why the bible can tell us in Revelation 13:8 that our names were written in the Lambs book of life from the foundation of the

world. Our name was not written in the book when we put up our hand and prayed a prayer like an evangelist might have told us. It was written in love before the beginning of time! Can you get your head around this? God thought about us, loved us, and favoured us before this world was even created. In light of this how can our acceptance before God be dependent on anything we have done right or wrong when he chose us to be his people before we even existed?! Before we had the chance to do anything right or wrong! The foundation of our adoption into God's family is that we are loved & chosen by God for no other reason than grace – unmerited favour!

Before the foundation of the world it was purposed that Christ would shed his blood to save mankind. He died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), not wishing that any should perish (2 Pet 3:9), that all should come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:2). YES, BUT the problem is summed up by these words from Ephesians 2:1 is **“you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.”** Because of our sinfulness & the spiritual death that resulted this great offer would fall on spiritually deaf ears (Rom 3:11). So after unpacking our condition a bit more in Ephesians 2 Paul says in verses 4-5; **“But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”** Therefore as Jesus said; **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him”** (John 6:44). **“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom *he will*”** (John 5:21). In short, what Lazarus contributed to his resurrection, you contributed to your salvation!

So, on the one hand Christ genuinely died for the whole world and genuinely offers salvation to whosoever. But on the other hand he died for a specific people that no one can number. The bible calls that number the elect. And without God's electing love awakening and capturing hearts no one would ever be saved – there would never have been any whosoever's. BUT because of God electing love a number that no one can number will be saved! This is the kind of picture I think you get when you wrestle with all Scripture teaches around this.

So often when trying to understand these things I feel people start with the wrong assumption... They assume what is being said is that people are banging on the door of heaven to get in and God opens the door a little, and accepts some people but turns others away... That, I believe, is a wrong assumption that thinks too highly of man and too lowly of God. Jesus said in John 6:37; **“All the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”** The truth, I believe, is more like this. God is standing outside with the door wide open, calling out to all people with outstretched arms, *“come, come, come to me! If anyone is thirsty come and drink and eat! Come and receive forgiveness. Come and be restored.”* But we are too busy exchanging the glory of God for things worthless in comparison. Chasing sinful desires and the things of the world that lead us away from God towards a lost eternity - drinking

from the broken cisterns of this world! BUT God being rich in mercy reaches out in undeserved kindness and takes hold of number that no man can number and rescues and redeems and restores a people for himself! And for some reason beyond our comprehension we are found among that number – loved & chosen by God.

We might not be able to get our heads around it. I don't think we fully can and I don't think we have to, for the secret things belong to God! But we do need to understand that God has always loved us - this has been revealed to us. We have been the focus of his love from eternity past. His love for us never started and it will never end. It is the length of eternity. It cannot be measured. As long as God exists he will love us in Christ!

Also his love doesn't waver up and down like a line on a temperature chart. It is always at maximum temperature. If we could see his love for us on a chart that covered eternity, the line on the chart would never waver, it would never dip, it would never be broken! There would never be a day (a second even) when he walk out on us. The steadfast love of the Lord towards us NEVER ceases – even for one second! His love towards us is as constant and unchanging as himself. It depends on his nature not our performance... Therefore if God has set his saving love upon you it will remain. Nothing will ever pluck you from his hand. Nothing will ever rob you of that love. Nothing! If all hell is set loose on you, if everything in life goes wrong and falls apart, his everlasting love will not let you go!

Listen to how Paul continues; **“For we know brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (or deep assurance.)”**

Now Paul has already noted evidence of their election in verse three – their work of faith, labour of love & endurance of hope - we looked at these last time. Now he turns to a different type of evidence. He says **“our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”** His focus is on the gospel here... The gospel is not only words, it is not mere opinions or suggestions, it is the message of God & therefore it comes with God's power. It is more than words. As Paul wrote to the Romans; **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”** He is saying the same thing in a different way here. There is inherent power in the gospel found in no other message. There is no other word that has God's stamp of authenticity & authority like it.

What is the gospel? The gospel is everything Scripture teaches us about Christ – nothing more, thing less. It is the inexhaustible Christ-centred message of God, the Christ-centred unpacking of Scripture which keeps

pointing us to all he is, all he has done, all he has promised, all he has called us to & all we are in him by grace! In one word the gospel is *Christ!*

Another way of saying this is that the gospel is a Spirit-filled message – there is no message or revelation more full of the Spirit than the gospel. The gospel comes with the Holy Spirit the Holy Spirit always comes with the gospel. He comes to show us our need for it, he comes to assure our hearts with it, he comes to sanctify us through it & he comes to empower us to spread it. A Spirit filled church is a gospel believing, gospel proclaiming, gospel celebrating, gospel reflecting & gospel shaped church. Nothing else is allowed to shape it! The more truly full of the Spirit a church is the more the gospel will sound forth from it & nothing else will be allowed to distract from it. Note how Paul says **“our gospel”** – the gospel is our message! This is our message! We’re not waiting on another.

If a church is shaped by anything else but the gospel then it is not a church, & certainly not a Spirit-filled one. The very reason the Spirit has come is to help us hear the gospel & herald the gospel. It is the gospel that distinguishes us as Christian. Christ is the gospel & it is the gospel that tells us & the world all we need to know about him.

There is also no message that brings more positive conviction or assurance to the hearts of those truly loved & chosen by God. They can’t get enough of it, they never get bored of it, they will not allow anything to take priority over it & they refuse to graduate from it because it is the powerful, Spirit-filled message that enables them to know Christ & live for Christ more & more. All their longings are met in it & all their hope rests on it because they are looking to Christ alone. Therefore their hearts burn within them when they hear it & they get frustrated when they don’t.

These believes heard not only the external call of the gospel through Paul’s preaching & they heard the internal call, conviction, assurance of the Holy Spirit. Two people can here the same gospel, one hears a mere man talking & is bored out of his mind. The other hears the voice of God calling & his heart burns within him. And this call is not a once off call this is a call we cannot shake. When we hear the gospel he hear God’s call. We might hear it for the first time or maybe we’re thinking of packing everything in & then we hear the call again – it’s inescapable. For we can say with Paul **“our gospel came... not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”** Paul was convinced by it, the Thessalonians were convinced by it, are you convinced. I can’t do that, only the power, presence & assurance of the Spirit can.

No doubt these Christians saw accompanying signs & wonders etc & we pray we see the same in our day, but this is not what Paul is specifically talking about here since he uses different terms. No he is talking about the Spirit-empowered proclamation of Christ itself & he is talking about the internal operation of the Spirit in the human heart. It’s only by the Spirit’s power that the Word can do its work in our hearts. Paul

has the same thing in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 2. Some of you will hear me this morning, others will hear God – that is what we're talking about. And when the gospel goes forth God's voice is always heard by God's people because his sheep will know his voice. John Stott writes; "It is only through the preaching & receiving of the gospel that God's secret purpose comes to be revealed."

Paul continues; **"You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received (welcomed) the word in much afflictions, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."** Note that these believers received/welcomed the message; highlight the idea of inwardly accepting it. Paul wrote in chapter 2:13; **"And we constantly thank God for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."** This is what we've been talking about. And they welcomed the message with the joy of the Holy Spirit. Again we see the combination of word & Spirit. The Spirit enables these believers to welcome God's message joyfully in spite of the severe persecution they faced because of it – such is the work of God in their hearts.

When the Spirit opens the eyes of our hearts to see the gospel for what it truly is we see it is worth giving up everything for & worth going through anything for because we grasp that the joy we find in Christ cannot be found in anything or anyone else in this world. We welcome the gospel no matter what the cost because the joy we find in Christ is unspeakable & full with glory. To have that condemnation lifted, what joy. To find our true selves in him, what joy! To know we loved & chosen by him, what joy. To have him forever, what joy!

And of course if we get this then what is working in us will work its way out. Paul notes that these believers became examples. The Greek word was used to describe a seal that marked wax or a stamp that minted coins. The mark of Christ was apparent in the lives of these believers. His stamp was all over them. They became the next generation of Christ imitators because Christ's power was at work in them. That is what the Spirit has come into our lives to do – to leave the mark of Christ all over us so we know we are his & so others know we are his! Pentecostal writer Thomas Smail writes; **"The work of the Spirit is to draw out of Christ all that is in him for us, so that we may be the primary expression of his glory."** The Spirit's role in our lives is to connect us to Christ who is our life & to make us like Christ so that as Christ is exalted in our lives others will be drawn to him. This is why Pentecostals have always been a Christ-centred movement of people with our rally call being around Jesus as Saviour, healer, baptiser & coming King. We are here to sound forth the word about Christ by our message & our example. This is our God-given agenda & this is what we are all about. We have no other emphasis, we have no other message.