

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“Destined for Salvation” (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10)
November 15, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I am preaching on today’s passage from that the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, which many biblical scholars identify as his earliest epistle in the New Testament. Along with his missionary companion Silas, Paul founded the Christian church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. He did this primarily by preaching the gospel every Sabbath, and in doing so, as we read in Acts, Paul “argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I am preaching to you’” (Acts 17:2-3).

Paul was not preaching nifty quotable quotes or points to ponder like you might read in *Reader’s Digest*. Paul was not preaching about how God wants you to be a nicer person, or more “mindful”, or to live with purpose. Paul was preaching the gospel—the good news of the unconditional and immeasurable love of God for the world demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul was preaching that Jesus is indeed the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament, and that just as he had been destined to do, had died and been raised from the dead for our salvation. Because Paul had personally experienced this love of God during his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, he could preach from his heart. Paul was preaching what he later wrote in his Letter to the Romans, that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ “who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25).

Through the power of the Holy Spirit as Paul preached this gospel many people in Thessalonica heard it and believed, and experienced the life changing love of God for them...and the Christian church in Thessalonica began. Later, while continuing his missionary journeys preaching the gospel throughout the Roman Empire Paul wrote an open letter to these Christians, a letter we know as his First Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul’s deep love for them is clear in the first chapter as he effuses:

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:2-5).

Paul emphasizes that his recipients were not only beloved by God but also chosen by God—“we know, brothers and sisters *beloved* by God that he has *chosen* you.” We see this idea again in today’s passage from the fifth and final chapter of this letter as Paul reiterates, “God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10). God has destined *you* not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through Jesus Christ. You are destined for salvation.

One of my favorite movies of all time is the 1994 classic *Forrest Gump*, a truly gospel soaked film. One of the recurring themes is the theme of destiny. Early in the film the young Forrest asks his mom, “What’s my destiny, momma?” to which she responds, “You’re gonna have to figure that out for yourself.” Later in the film Lieutenant Dan, Forrest’s commanding officer in Vietnam who had been wounded so severely he lost both legs, unleashes on Forrest one night at the hospital:

Now you listen to me. We all have a destiny. Nothing just happens; it’s all part of a plan. I should have died out there with my men! But now, I’m nothing but a cripple, a legless freak! Look! Look! Look at me! Do you see that? You cheated me. I had a destiny. I was supposed to die in the field, with honor. That was my destiny and you cheated me out of it. You understand what I’m saying, Gump? This wasn’t supposed to happen, not to me, I had a destiny.

Near the end of this film the theme of destiny surfaces again as Forrest stands at the grave of his beloved deceased wife Jenny. As many people do at the gravesides of loved ones, he spoke to her, “Jenny, I don’t know if Momma was right or if it’s Lieutenant Dan. I don’t know if we each have a destiny, or if we’re all just floating around accidental like on a breeze, but I think maybe it’s both.”

At different seasons of your life you may have equally different perspectives on your destiny. Sometimes you may feel like your destiny is up to you and you have a clear vision and a matching drive and focus to pursue it. Other times you may think aspects of your life are absurd, that perhaps you are “just floating around accidental-like on a breeze.” And in the hardest times you may echo Lieutenant Dan, “This wasn’t supposed to happen, not to me, I had a destiny.”

The good news of the gospel is that because of the love of God in Jesus Christ, no matter what has happened in your life, no matter what will happen in your life, you still have a destiny from God—you are still destined for salvation. Along these lines in the back of *The Book of Common Prayer* you can find the “Articles of Religion” (aka the “Thirty-nine Articles”) which summarize the doctrine of the English Reformation. While often overlooked these articles are rife with high octane gospel. Article XVII states the following about your destiny:

Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God...to bring (people) by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour...the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ (871).

This “Spirit of Christ” is the same Holy Spirit who had been at work in the hearts of the believers in Thessalonica, the same Holy Spirit who had been at work in the heart of the Apostle Paul, and even now is the same Holy Spirit at work in your heart to assure you that you are a beloved child of God, to assure you that you have been chosen by God, to assure you that you have been destined for salvation. Again, we read in today’s passage: “God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.” God does the choosing.

In the Old Testament Joshua famously proclaimed, “Choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). That is the law. And yet at the Last Supper Jesus proclaimed something very different, “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). That is the gospel. And because God has chosen you...you are destined for salvation.

Amen.