

Congregation, today we have witnessed the baptism and profession of faith of Sean Sweeney. Sean came and saw me a few months ago and said that he wanted to publicly profess his faith and show that he trusted in the completed work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sins and the subsequent gift of eternal life. Now Sean recalled some of his history to us, his upbringing, and the people God has brought into his life to bring him to this point. But overall, Sean realizes that it was a special work of God's Holy Spirit working in his heart that encouraged him to embrace Jesus Christ as His Saviour. For all this we give thanks to God! Now on these occasions it's great to delight in God's goodness and to thank him for it. Yet, one of the greatest struggles Christians seem to have is to know they are chosen by God to eternal life. Some Christians, even after their profession of faith, still seem to question their assurance of salvation. And strangely enough, often it is the elderly who struggle with this. Perhaps this struggle increases in a Christian's life because the devil intensifies his efforts to cast doubt in one's mind as they get closer to heaven's doors.

So one of the things that is vital in a Christian's life is to keep reading God's Word and spend time in prayer. I highlight this, for God's word gives us proof that we can be sure about our eternal salvation. The true Christian can be sure that they are eternally safe in God's hands, for God's word reminds them that God is holding them and will not allow them to fall into hell at the last minute of their lives. So that means the proof of whether you are saved and chosen by God and assured of your salvation is in whether you accept God's word about Jesus Christ and as it is proclaimed by faithful preachers.

For the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just words, it comes with the power of God, with the Holy Spirit and with a deep conviction! Paul says in Romans in Ch 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. . ." Jesus Himself said in John 5:24, that he who believes has eternal life." And the proof that you have accepted God's word is not just seen in the words you speak, or the times you come to worship, or the office you hold in the church. The proof that you have accepted God's word is in what you do, in the response to the word you accepted!

It is lovely when people come to me and say that they believe in Jesus Christ and that is great reason for thanks. But the evidence of their election as God's chosen child is not just seen in their words, but also in their response to the good news of Jesus Christ. And if that is missing, then we may have good reason to doubt their words. In verses 2-13 of this chapter, Paul could give thanks and remember the work of the Thessalonians produced by faith, their labour prompted by love and their endurance in the hope of the Lord's return. And now he goes on to say in verse 4-5, that he is sure they are loved and chosen by God because when he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to them, they believed the Apostle at his word. They received them as messengers from God. Ch 2:13 states: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."

Paul doesn't take the credit for the people's election but he gives that to God. He doesn't say that because of his excellent presentation they believed. No they believed, for the gospel comes with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. Acts 17 records that how Paul and Silas and other Christians were poorly treated in Thessalonica, yet they received Paul's message as God's word and acted on it. The Thessalonian Christians were probably ostracized and suffered severely for the gospel's sake, yet despite that, v6 says they imitated the lives of the apostles and the Lord and we read that they welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

Now this doctrine of election sends shivers down the spines of many people. It does so, because people put the cart before the horse! For example, there are people who spend all their time complaining about God's hidden will and do not pay enough attention to his revealed will. As a result, they think that God is not fair in that He chooses some and allows others to remain in their sin. In other words, they do not accept the revealed Word as true, a word that is given by faithful men.

Note again what Paul says about the Thessalonian Christians. Paul knows the Thessalonian Christians are loved and chosen by God because they accepted the message that was proclaimed. He doesn't say he knows because he has figured out God's unrevealed will, or because of their thinking or some experience they have had. No, because they accepted the message of God as it was given to them by Paul and they have acted on it! Another example. I received an email recently from a friend who told me that one of her friends is withdrawing from the church. This friend is questioning whether she has ever been saved at all because of all the wrong stuff that is in her life. They continually look at themselves and always see more and more reasons of why they think they could not possibly be amongst the

chosen. "I am such a bad person, I have failed so often, I have so many shortcomings, and my thoughts are not pure" and their lists of wrongs are endless. Instead of accepting God's word and believing what it so clearly reveals, that God so loved this world that he sent his only Son to be its Saviour, and that those who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life, they continually look at themselves and don't believe what God's word clearly says! Namely that all our sins are forgiven when we truly repent and believe! Another example is when people keep asking the wrong questions. For instance, "How can I know that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for me when I am not sure I am elected? Perhaps I am not saved after all and then I would be wasting my time and all my efforts would be in vain!" What they are actually saying is that they first want to be sure that they are elected and that they are amongst the chosen, before they accept the word of God as it comes to them from those who faithfully proclaim its message.

But note again what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say – you Thessalonians can now start working in the kingdom because God has told me that you are chosen. Nor does he say that the Thessalonians could be sure they were chosen because they had some special sign from heaven that tells you that God loves you. People are always looking for signs. But the apostle Paul doesn't say anything about special signs, experiences, voices, dreams or whatever else you may have. He doesn't say that you have to speak in tongues. He doesn't say you have had to experience some miraculous conversion. In fact, I would go so far as to say that people who suggest that this should be the experience of the Christian are sadly misguided. It's even worse than that when you think it through, what these people are actually saying is that you cannot trust the word of God or those who faithfully proclaim it!

"How can we know we are chosen?" We can only know it after we have accepted the word. I stress that brothers and sisters because there are thousands of people who don't take Jesus at His word with the result that they end up in a state of depression. Consider, do you think God would have sent his Son if He knew you could save yourself? Not a chance! In fact, the moment you think you are good enough to be saved is the moment you are not saved! The Scriptures make it clear! We are not saved by works but by faith! It is by faith in Jesus Christ we receive his righteousness that makes us elect! Here in v6 is the evidence of election. Allow me to paraphrase. "These people accepted the word of God as given by Paul and Silas for they became imitators of them and the Lord, and they became a model to all believers in the region, and the Lord's message rang out beyond the immediate region. Their faith became known everywhere! It became so well known that the apostle doesn't have to say anything about it! In fact, more than that, they turned away from idol worship! (v9)"

The first sign of election is not some special sign or phenomenon, or even claiming that Jesus came and spoke to you in the bathroom. In fact, it is not even that Sean came up front this morning. The first sign of election is that you stop sinning and get on with God's work. These people not only stopped their idol worship, they were waiting for the Lord's imminent return, the very one who came and who rescued them and us from the coming wrath of God in the first place! How do we know we are loved and chosen? By believing God's word and taking it seriously. And by the way, that you don't believe yet doesn't mean that you're not chosen. Sometimes people come to the faith at 80 years old even though they been to church all those years.

Now perhaps you are suffering with a guilty conscience, or struggling with another sin, that doesn't mean you are not elected to eternal life in Jesus Christ. Perhaps you are suffering from depression but it doesn't mean they are not chosen. Brothers and Sisters don't put the cart before the horse! Take Jesus at his word! Don't pry into who is elect and who isn't and what God has hidden from us. It is not our business. It's not my business! You don't even know it of yourself till you believe in Jesus Christ and until then you cannot answer the question of whether you are elect or not! Our responsibility is to believe and follow and to do! That is Scripture's teaching. God elects and the Son gathers, and we have a responsibility to believe, to follow and to obey and to do!

Believe Jesus when he answered, "The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29). Believe Jesus who said "I am the bread of life whoever believes in me will never be hungry or thirsty again!" (John 6:35) Believe in Jesus who said, "Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest!" (Matthew 11:28). Congregation, stick with the Word! The writer to Hebrews reminds us in Ch 1:1-2; "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." Jesus is the word of God as he speaks to you in the gospel. Don't reject Jesus for some other word. The Apostle Peter was right when he said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!" (John 6:68). When we have Jesus and His word we have it all. Without Him and His word we have nothing. Amen!