

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:15

Saints Triumphant

November 17 & 18, 2019

On September 3, 1987, Henry Dempsey became part of aviation history. The Eastern Express Airline captain was at the controls of 15-seat Beechcraft 99 turboprop flying from Lewiston, Maine to Boston. There were no passengers aboard at the time. The twin-engine commuter plane was being flown to Boston to be used for a flight from there. At an altitude of about 4,000 feet, the pilots heard a noise/rattle in the back of the plane. He turned the controls over to his co-pilot and walked toward the back of the plane to check on things.

As he walked back to check on the noise, the aircraft hit turbulence and he was thrown against the passenger door, which later would be determined that it had not been properly secured. The door, which is hinged at the bottom, and also becomes the exit stairs, fell open and Dempsey was partially sucked out of the plane. As he began to fall out of the plane, he grabbed at anything that he could to save his life. He caught one of the chain railings on the stairs. There he hung on for dear life – upside down and most of the way out of the plane at 4,000 feet above the ground going 190 MPH.

The co-pilot, saw that the *"door ajar"* indicator light was on and realized something had happened, so he changed course, declared an emergency and flew to the nearest airport. As he looked back, he couldn't see the captain. All he saw was the open door, and he thought that the pilot had fallen out of the plane. As the plane landed, Mr. Dempsey's face was about 12 inches above the runway. The co-pilot did not realize Henry was still hanging on to that rail until the plane was on the ground. When interviewed, Henry said: *"I thought I was fish bait. I thought I was going to die because there was absolutely nothing I could do."* So, he hung on with all of his strength for the next 15 minutes until the plane landed on the ground.

Perhaps, that's how the Thessalonians felt. Paul had every reason to pray especially hard for his dear friends back in Thessalonica. It was a relatively new and small congregation in a huge city. They had been facing fierce persecution. Paul wanted to encourage these fellow believers. He wanted them to remember that they had everything they needed to hang on to their beliefs. **"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."** As Henry Dempsey had that death grip on that stair railing, he wanted the Thessalonians to hang on to the Word of God. Even though they were surrounded with danger all around them, they would be okay as they hung on to the Word of God. Paul encouraged them to **"to hold fast to the teachings"** that they had learned. He wanted them to trust the one who was much stronger than any of the destructive forces surrounding them.

So, I ask you this morning, what causes you to keep coming back here week after week? What causes families to bring their kids here day after day? How do you face all the storms that are surrounding you, day after day? Isn't it the words of Jesus? We need the same encouragement that Paul gave the Thessalonians. **"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."** Why can we trust those teachings? Look at the promises that those teachings give us. Look at who you are: **"But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved 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."** Paul looked at the believers in that small congregation and he saw **"brothers and sisters loved by the Lord."** He looked at those believers and he saw people **called by God through the Gospel.** God didn't see them as the sinners they were, but as children who had been **called by God.**

What a comfort Paul was giving them. What a comfort Paul is giving us. When you look around here today, what do you see? I see a whole bunch of people who come from all kinds of different backgrounds, have all kinds of different likes, etc. Yet, I also see you as people **"called"** and **"chosen"** by God. What did Paul do? He gave thanks to God for the Thessalonians. This morning, I would like to do the same for you. I want to do something that I don't usually do as often as I should. I want to thank you – every one of you. It's hard to believe that I have had the privilege to stand up before you week after week for 25 years and remind you that you are **"called"** and **"chosen"** not by me, but by God. You have watched our family grow up. You have been there more times than I can think of. I have sat with you at the bedside of

your loved ones, and we watched them go home to heaven. I have laughed with you. I have cried with you. All of that with one purpose in mind. I want you to know that you are **“called”** and **“chosen”** by God. I have the same prayer for you that the Apostle Paul had for the Thessalonians. **“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.”** I want all of us to have one big family reunion in heaven.

Yet, isn't it amazing that being saved by God has nothing to do with us? Our salvation rests entirely on God's power and his wisdom. When you really think about it, our lives as Christians really boils down to one thing – waiting. From the moment that the Holy Spirit first entered our hearts through the waters of baptism or through our first hearing of the Gospel, our eyes became locked on heaven. Each and every day is another day we wait to be saints triumphant. The Bible uses the word *“saint”* to describe believers. Through Jesus, we are people who have been made holy by the blood of Jesus. We are his saints. Right now we have the promise of heaven. Even though we have it, we also don't have all of it yet. But we will. We can trust the promises of God.

In a few minutes, we will remember those believers who were here last year, but now have the fullness of heaven. Perhaps, there is someone here that will not be here next year this time. You will be saints triumphant. Today, is one of those days in the church year that is a happy day. We are reminded that we have been called and chosen by God.

Suppose there was a machine that would give you any experience you desired. You could choose to experience winning Olympic gold, or falling in love, or making a great scientific discovery, and then the neurons in your brain would be stimulated such that you would experience a perfect simulation of actually doing these things. Would you plug into it? If so, would you ever turn it off? Or would you want to live in world that was just simulated? The promises of God are not simulations. They are the promises of a God who loves us with an endless amount of love. As you go through the storms of life. Stand firm on the teachings of God. Hold on to his promises. Trust that you have a God that will help you. Once again hear those words of Paul: **“we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved 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.”** Amen.