

Our Spiritual Biography

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

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It was Monday of this past week, at 8:17 our time, that John MacArthur, the man whose life and ministry has most influenced my own, went to be with the Lord, the Lord that he has served and loved for 56 years. His memorial service is scheduled for late August – and, prior to that, I want to write and publish a tribute. And so, that will be coming, I'm in the process of that, and that's a biblical idea – read David's tribute to Jonathan and Saul in 2 Samuel 1 – so, I want to do that. This morning, it's not that, but I do want, just for a moment, to reflect a bit with you; this is very personal to me.

I first got to know John almost 40 years ago when Sheila and I moved to California in September 1987; I was only 26 years old at the time. My first week as an employee at Grace to You, as a study guide editor originally, the first six months, he stopped by my office, and we talked for thirty minutes about a theological issue, and a relationship was born that would later grow into friendship. Five years after we arrived there, I was still at Grace to You, and in 1991, when I was only 31 years old, John took a massive risk and asked me to be the managing director of Grace to You. I enjoyed our regular interactions there, and then when I became an elder in the mid-1990s there at Grace Church, our paths crossed even more, and our relationship grew. But it was really from 1999 to 2003 that our relationship grew into a deep friendship and when I got to know John best, because it was during those four years that I served as the senior associate pastor of Grace Church and as John's personal assistant – we became friends in that time; we spoke often, enjoyed many meals together, we traveled all over the world in ministry, we even played golf together, which certainly stretched my sanctification. He and Patricia were there for the birth of all three of our girls, he visited both of Sheila's parents as they lay dying at home – we've been in each other's homes many times – and so, really a deep friendship was formed in those years.

Then in October 2003, I left Grace Church and moved to Texas to be the pastor of this church, and a few weeks later, John came to preach my installation service – if you've never heard that, I would encourage you to go online and listen to it; it's still on our website. Over the past 22

years, we have spoken in each other's churches, in various conferences together, including, for a number of years at the Shepherds Conference, he graciously invited me to serve with him for many years on the boards of Grace to You and the Master's University and Seminary – and so, ours is a long-term, deep friendship. At times in our relationship, John has been my pastor, my boss, my fellow elder – but he has always been my mentor, spiritual father, and friend; most of what I know about preaching, and all of what I know about the church, I learned from John MacArthur at Grace Community Church.

There are five key lessons I learned from John; they're the same key lessons that have profoundly affected our church through his influence on me and our elders, and the larger Christian community as well. I'm not going to develop them here; I hope to do that in my tribute that will be forthcoming – let me just list them for you. First of all, I was influenced profoundly by the biblical mandate for expository preaching. Those of you who are younger may not know this, but expository preaching was largely extinct in the second half of the 20th century, and John was hugely responsible, not alone, but hugely responsible for its recovery in the church of Jesus Christ; he had a confidence in the scripture that was contagious. And people ask me what was the most important lesson I learned at Grace Church under John – it was that; you can trust the word of God, you can trust the spirit of God, and the word of God to do their work.

Secondly, I learned the biblical doctrine of the church – I'd never really been in, at least for any time at all, a clear, biblical church, a New Testament kind of church, but that's what I saw at Grace Community. There, I learned about a plurality of elders leading the church, and every Christian in the church serving, ministering to the body.

Thirdly, I learned the priority of love and devotion to Jesus Christ – from the first Sunday at Grace, in early September of 1987, I saw and learned more and more about his own personal commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ; I learned that and caught that in the years I was under his ministry.

Number four – the clarity and defense of the biblical gospel; many of you first knew of John MacArthur by reading his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* – he spent his ministry defending and clarifying the biblical gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And finally, I learned from him the importance of personal integrity and real holiness. John wasn't a perfect man; he wouldn't want you to think that he was – but I can tell you this about him; having seen him both in public and in private, in situations all across the world, he was always the same man in private that he was in the pulpit; he was a man of integrity. His kids told me that, over the last two-and-a-half years, as he struggled with pain and suffering and multiple surgeries – and this is remarkable; this is only God's grace at work – they told me that he never once complained, but he just expressed his thanks and gratitude to them for their care.

In God's amazing goodness and providence to me, and thanks to the overwhelmingly gracious invitation of one of his family members, last Saturday morning it was my privilege to fly to Los Angeles and get to be with John one last time. He was in ICU, but he was very much mentally alert and sharp as ever. It was such a sweet time – I say sweet because there was just an intimacy with that, that I will never forget. As I sat next to his bed, he reached out and grabbed my hand and had a firm grip – and he held it through my entire time with him and punctuated my comments and my prayer with an extra squeeze just to say amen to that, I agree with that. I spoke for myself, obviously; I wanted to share my own heart with him, but I also knew that God had given me a special privilege and that I was speaking, literally, on behalf of thousands of others who would love to have that opportunity. So, I told him very clearly and at length how much I love him, how much I appreciate him, how much his life and ministry have indelibly marked my own – I told him that I stand, literally, on his shoulders, every day of my life. I prayed with him, and I rehearsed biblical truths with him that I knew he knew better than I – he has forgotten more than I've ever known. I reminded him, though, that his pain and suffering over the last two-and-a-half years certainly didn't seem temporary and they didn't seem light – but as Paul reminds us, they are working for us "an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." I reminded him of Revelation 1, that our Lord said, "I was dead, and now I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and the grave," that his impending death would not be the random end of some medical process, but it would be the personal decision of Jesus

Christ Himself. It was a wonderful time with him, a couple of his kids – and as I was leaving, I realized that we were saying goodbye. So, I stood at the foot of his bed, and I said, "John, we're not going to see each other again in this life, but I love you, and we'll be reunited soon in the Lord's presence," to which he gave me a big thumbs-up.

I'm not going to discuss the immense impact of his life this morning, that's not appropriate; he wouldn't want me to do that. I'm not going to rehearse his personal biography; there's another time and place for that – because I can tell you that what mattered most to John MacArthur was not his unique personal biography, but his spiritual biography. That's why his favorite text for funerals – and I heard him preach it often – is in the text we read a moment ago, in 2 Thessalonians 2. It's a passage that explains John's spiritual biography, and the spiritual biography of every Christian here this morning – and friends, your story and mine, John MacArthur's story, is a story of grace. You see, John was a sinner saved by grace, just like every one of us, and everything that he was – his character, his unique spiritual gift of teaching, his extraordinary ministry accomplishments – he would tell you that all of those were solely because of God's sovereign grace. So, to honor John this morning, and to prepare our hearts for communion, I invite you to turn with me again to 2 Thessalonians 2.

The Christians in Thessalonica were worried about their future – they'd been told that the day of the Lord had already come, and that they were going to experience God's wrath as He poured it out on earth during the tribulation. And Paul writes to encourage them and to comfort them, and to correct their misunderstanding – and he tells them that they don't need to be afraid, because their future is certain. You see, God had already finished their spiritual biography – the last chapter had already been written. From God's perspective, the spiritual biography of every Christian – if you're in Christ, your biography – really consists of only three chapters. But the amazing thing about those three chapters is that they reach all the way back into eternity past, and they reach all the way forward into eternity future. Let's look at our spiritual biography together.

The first chapter, we'll call the divine prologue; election and redemption. The divine prologue; election and redemption – first of all, when we look at the first chapter in our spiritual biography,

it goes all the way back before there was a world, when there was only God and nothing else – and the first part of that prologue tells us that we were loved and chosen by the Father in eternity past. Look at verse 13 – "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen," God has selected. This is election; and notice election is sovereign; "He has chosen." Notice it's personal; "you." Notice election is unconditioned on anything in you; He "chose you from the beginning," before the creation, before you even existed and had ever done anything good or bad, like He says in Romans 9. And it's intentional; He has chosen you "for salvation," it has an ultimate purpose. You see, Paul thanked God for the Christians in the church in Thessalonica because God had chosen them for salvation before time, in eternity past – that's how he began his first letter to this church, in 1 Thessalonians 1:4, he says, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you." Paul develops this even more in his letter to the Ephesians – look at Ephesians 1:4, "just as He," that is, the Father, "chose us in Him," that is, in Christ, He chose us "before the foundation of the world," before there was anything but God, in eternity past, "that we would be holy and blameless before Him." He chose us in order that we would reflect His character, and that we would bear His name. "In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

Now, I preached six messages on these verses from Ephesians 1 – if you struggle with this issue of election, you came from an Arminian setting, you don't know what this is about, or you just need to work through this, go listen to those messages online; I think they'll help you think about this issue biblically. But here in our text, back in 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul doesn't defend election, he applies it, and here's what he says. Christian, if you've repented and believed in Jesus Christ, because of nothing in you, in eternity past, when there was only God, God chose you; He chose to set His love on you – and we can be secure in God's love for us and His choice of us because we were never the cause of it; the cause is solely in God, in His sovereign grace, in His sovereign love. But why did the Father choose us, to what end? Look at verse 13, "God has chosen you for salvation" – He chose us in order to rescue us from our sin and from all of its consequences, especially the just punishment of God that our sin deserves. Look back at 1 Thessalonians 1:10 – notice how he describes Jesus at the end of verse 10, "Jesus, who rescues

us," who saves us, from what? "From the wrath to come." Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:9, "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." God chose us in order to rescue us from His own wrath against our sin. Christian, think about this – your spiritual biography began in eternity past, when you weren't even a gleam in your parents' eyes, before they existed, before anything but God existed, He chose to set His love on you in order to rescue you from your sins. Paul says be encouraged – God loves you, and He demonstrated His love by choosing you for salvation.

Now, how did Paul know that these believers were chosen – how did he know they were elect? Or more importantly, how can we know if we're elect, how can we know if we've been chosen? It's very clear – go back to 1 Thessalonians 1:4, "knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you" – how, Paul, how do you know? "For," verse 5, because "our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Look at chapter 2, verse 13 – "you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." You heard the gospel, you believed it – that's how you know that you're elect. That's how Paul knew that these believers were elect. Spurgeon writes, "Many want to know their election before they look to Christ, but they cannot learn it thus – it is only to be discovered by looking unto Jesus. Look to Jesus, believe on Him, and you shall make proof of your election directly, for as surely as you believe, you are elect. There will be no doubt about His having chosen you when you have chosen Him." So, your spiritual biography began in eternity past, when God the Father loved you and chose you as His own.

But there's a second part of the divine prologue of our spiritual biography, and that is, we were loved and purchased by the Son at the cross. You see, not only did the Father love you and choose you for adoption, but the Son loved you and gave Himself for you. Look at verse 13 again in our text, "Brethren, beloved by the Lord" – in these two letters, the Lord is a reference to Jesus Christ. So, he's saying this – the Father loved you and chose you, He set His love on you, and then He gave you to His Son, you were a love-gift, part of the redeemed humanity that the Father gave to the Son as an expression of His love; you were part of that group. And then the Son loved you, and He came into the world as one of us in order to give His life for you.

Ephesians 5:2, "Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." So, the first chapter of our spiritual biography is that divine prologue – it starts in eternity past, when you were chosen and loved by the Father, and then, two thousand years ago, when Jesus came into the world, He loved you and He purchased you at the cross – and all of that happened before you were ever born.

The second chapter in our spiritual biography is what we'll call the defining moment. The defining moment, which is salvation. The defining moment in our spiritual biography is what happened the day we believed in Jesus Christ, and Paul tells us in our text that our salvation, the day we really came to faith, began with the divine call. This is the divine side – look at verse 14, "He called you through our gospel." You see, election happened in eternity past, the sacrifice of Christ happened two thousand years ago, but those works of the Father and the Son began to bear fruit in your life on the day God called you. Now, scripture identifies two calls related to the gospel – first of all, there is the general call. This is God's universal call to all who hear the gospel message, the call for them to repent and to believe – that is to anybody who hears the gospel. But secondly, there is the effectual call, and this is the use of the word calling that's used most frequently in the New Testament; this is the Father's powerful, irresistible summons of the elect, those He chose to Himself, and He does it through the gospel message so that they then respond in saving faith. One clear biblical example of this is Lydia in Acts 16:14, where we read that she was listening to Paul, the gospel, "and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." He was calling her to Himself. James Montgomery Boice used to illustrate the two calls like this – he said, "Imagine a man and his wife are walking down the street and someone calls to both of them – the man ignores the call, assuming that it's for someone else, but the wife hears someone calling her, and she turns around. Both heard the general call, but she responded, and in her case, it was effectual. Those God calls effectually not only hear the gospel, but they hear God in the gospel calling to them, and they respond by turning to Him and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ." Why? It's not something in them, it's not because they're smarter – the only reason is because of the work of the Holy Spirit, and everyone that God calls in this effectual sense will be justified. Romans 8:29-30 – there, Paul writes, "those whom God called" like this, effectually, "He also justified, and those whom He justified, He also glorified."

There's a helpful picture of what the effectual call looks like in one of the Greek words in the New Testament that's used to describe it – John 6:44 says this, "No one," this is Jesus, "No one can come to Me," He means for salvation, "unless the Father who sent me draws him." That word, draws, is a powerful word; it occurs some eight times in the New Testament. One Greek lexicon defines it like this – it means to compel by irresistible authority. Sometimes that word, draw, is actually translated drag – in Acts 16:19, you remember the slave girl that was saved – "and when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them" – there's the word – "into the marketplace." Jesus' meaning in John 6:44 is clear – no human being has the capacity or power to approach Him for salvation *unless* – here's the one exception – unless the Father compels him to come, draws him. Now, don't misunderstand; that doesn't mean God drags the sinner to faith kicking and screaming against our will – no, God draws us by changing our hearts and our wills and making us willing to come; we want to run to Christ. Unregenerate people are spiritually dead, so it's understandable that they hear the gospel and think it's irrelevant, boring – but sometimes, a person hears the gospel and something truly miraculous occurs. Here's how Robert Reymond describes it: "Mysteriously, imperceptibly, he no longer hears simply the voice of the preacher – instead, what he now hears is also the voice of God summoning him into fellowship with His Son, and he responds to Christ in faith." What happened? Reymond writes, "The scriptures would say that God effectually called an elect sinner to Himself."

Back to our text, verse 14 says the Person who called us was God the Father – in context, "He" is the Father; "He called you." The means the Father uses is the gospel – "He called you through our gospel." The reason He called was verse 13, "for salvation" – God calls us in order to accomplish the salvation for which He chose us in eternity past. Listen, if you're a Christian here this morning, this happened to you – maybe you had heard the gospel like I had many times before, and it made no dent in your soul, but the day of your salvation, that day, God used that same message to call you, to draw you irresistibly to Himself, and in that moment, He saved you. If you're here this morning and that's never happened to you, then hear the general call of the gospel – God sent His only son into the world, He sent Him to live the life that you were supposed to have lived, a life of obedience to the God who created you and sustains your life. But "all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" – we exist for Him, but we have

lived selfishly in rebellion against Him. Jesus came into the world to save sinners by His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and His resurrection – and if you will abandon your rebellion against God, if you will repent of your sins and put your faith in Jesus Christ, then the New Testament says you will be saved. So, this can be true of you this morning. Our salvation began with the divine call.

Secondly, it was accomplished through the Spirit – this is also part of the divine side of our salvation. Look at verse 13, "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit." Now, don't be confused; the most common use of the word sanctification in the New Testament is for the process by which those who are already believers become increasingly holy – but that's not how it's used here. Here, the word sanctification refers to what theologians call positional sanctification; it's what happens at the moment of your salvation. You see, at the moment you were saved, you were sanctified, you were set apart from sin to God as His special possession. That's why Paul can write to the Corinthians, that church with all of those problems, and he can begin like this in 1 Corinthians 1:2, "To the church ... at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Jesus Christ." It's because he's talking about something that happens at the moment of every believer's salvation, when we are set apart from sin to God as His special possession through the new birth that the Spirit enacts in us. Now, did you notice in our text that your salvation is the work of all three Persons of the Trinity? The Father initiated the plan by choosing us, the Son accomplishes the plan by purchasing our redemption, the Spirit completes our redemption by applying the plan of the Father and the work of the Son to us at the moment of our salvation.

Our salvation, the defining moment in our spiritual biography, thirdly, was appropriated through faith in the truth. This is the human side – notice what Paul adds in verse 13; he says our salvation is "through ... faith in the truth." Before salvation, we were deceived by Satan's lies, verse 10 – we didn't believe the truth. But at salvation, the Holy Spirit granted us faith – Ephesians 2:8-9, and at that moment, and from that moment, we believed the truth of God, we believed the gospel. So, when you look at your spiritual biography, you need to remember the divine prologue, that you were loved and chosen in eternity past by the Father, that you were loved and purchased by the Son at the cross, and then the defining moment in your spiritual

biography was the day of your salvation, the moment that God called you to Himself and made you His own.

But the final chapter in our shared spiritual biography takes us into eternity future – it is the destined conclusion, our glorification. Look at verse 14, "It was for this the Father called you through our gospel" – for what? "That you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." God loved us and chose us in eternity past, the Son loved us and purchased us at the cross, and then in time, the Holy Spirit applied that to us and saved us – but that's not the end of God's plan; that's just the beginning! There's another part of your spiritual biography – the reason God called you through the gospel wasn't primarily about this life, it was so that "you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." This life, as Spurgeon said, is like the front porch to eternity; you haven't even gotten into the house yet.

What does it mean to gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ? It means two things, I think – first of all, that we will see His glory. We're going to get to the beatitude in Matthew 5:8 shortly, where Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart" – listen to this, let this sink into your soul – "for they shall see God." Christian, you're going to see God. John 17:24, Jesus says, "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory" – that's your future, Christian.

But there's a second part of what it means to obtain, or to gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ – and this is amazing – we will share His glory. We'll share His glory – you say, in what way will we share His glory? First of all, we'll share the glory of His perfect character – at the moment we die, or Christ returns in the rapture, we will be transformed in a moment into the moral character of Jesus Christ. Romans 8:29 says, "Those whom God foreknew," that is, those whom God predetermined to have a relationship with, "He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son." John MacArthur, on Monday night, began to wear the glory of the perfect moral character of Jesus Christ – he's no longer a sinful man like he was throughout his life here, he is now perfect like Jesus. And someday, Christian, that's your legacy – this is why God saved you, so that you could share the moral character of Jesus Christ. You'll

still be you, but you will be like Jesus Christ – no more sin, no more lust, no more pride, no more selfishness, no more failure to love God, no more failure to love others – you'll be just like Jesus.

Secondly, you'll share the glory of His resurrected body – at the rapture, when Jesus returns, we'll get a body like His body. Philippians 3:21, He "will transform the body of our humble state" – that's us now – "into conformity with the body of His glory" – that's His resurrected body. You're still going to be you, it's still going to be your body – like a seed planted in the ground, it's going to come forth in a new and perfect, eternal form that will never decay and will never die. This is what you're called to – this is why God saved you; He saved you so that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, beloved, in light of that shared spiritual biography, there are some very practical points of application right here in our text. Number one – don't fear the future. They were afraid; the Thessalonians were afraid – and Paul says don't be afraid; God has already finished your biography! And, Christian, listen to this – the final chapter of your biography says you will gain the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ! Don't lose hope – don't fear.

Number two – stand firm in God's revealed word. That's how Paul concludes in verse 15 – "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." Now, that tradition has been passed down to us in the New Testament we hold in our hands – stand firm in believing God's revealed word.

Number three – pray. Pray that knowing the last chapter of your biography will "comfort and strengthen your heart in every good work and word." Look at verses 16-17 in our text – these were the verses, by the way, John preached at his mother's funeral. "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word." Listen – because you know the final chapter of your biography, you can serve with confidence in this life, knowing that your labor's not in vain here.

And finally, number four – give thanks to God. Give thanks to God for your own spiritual biography and for that of others with whom you share it. Verse 13, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord," because of these things. This is your spiritual biography – it's John's; today he has gained the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ in part – but that's your story, that's my story as well, and it is a story of grace, and we give thanks to God for that grace. And one way we give thanks is through the Lord's Table. Take a moment and prepare your heart as the men come.

Our Father, we are reminded of the song we heard earlier; were it not for grace, Lord, we know where we'd be, completely without hope. But, Lord, thank You for Your grace, that our lives, from eternity past to eternity future, that our lives are a story of Your sovereign grace. Lord, we love You and we thank You that You loved us and chose us in eternity past, for nothing in us – Lord, it humbles us to think about that. Thank You that You loved us and sent Your Son, Your only begotten Son, into the world to redeem us. And, Father, thank You that in our lives, there came a moment when You confronted us with the gospel, and through that gospel that day, You drew us irresistibly, compellingly, to Yourself. But, Lord, we're so grateful that's not the end of our story, but that's just the beginning of what You prepared us for, what You saved us for, that we will gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we'll see Him in His glory. We will see You, O God, and we'll be like You in our characters, and we'll be like Your Son in our resurrected bodies. Father, as we celebrate our biographies, as we give You thanks through the Lord's Table, we pray that You would forgive our sins – Lord, all of us who are already in Christ, who are His disciples, Lord, You've forgiven us our sins once and for all in justification, but we come acknowledging our sins to You now, not as our Judge, but as our Father, asking You to forgive us and cleanse us. Lord, bring right now, by Your Spirit, to each of our minds, sins of thought and attitude, sins of speech, actions, sins of omission, things that we should have done in loving You or loving others that we haven't, and sins of commission, where we have broken Your law. Lord, forgive us – help us to confess individually – and we ask for Your forgiveness so that we can truly give You thanks through the Lord's Table for the story of our lives, which is a story of grace, from beginning to end.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.