

## 2 Thessalonians 2:13, A Rapture Passage?

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Ἡμεῖς δὲ ὀφείλομεν εὐχαριστεῖν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοὶ ἠγαπημένοι ὑπὸ κυρίου, ὅτι εἴλατο ὑμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ἀπαρχὴν εἰς σωτηρίαν ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος καὶ πίστει ἀληθείας,

“But we ought to thank God always for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you, a firstfruit, for deliverance by the sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.”

### Synopsis:

2 Thessalonians 2:13, though frequently cited in theological works as a proof text for the soteriological doctrine of election, is probably best understood eschatologically as descriptive of God’s promise to deliver the church from the persecution and worldwide judgments of the Day of the Lord by means of a pretribulational rapture.

### Introduction

Years ago as a college student, I, like many Christian college students, wrestled with the issue of God’s sovereign election vs. man’s free will. A study of the relevant Bible verses eventually led me to a strong conviction that God sovereignly and unconditionally elects to salvation. One of the verses that was very influential for me was 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Not only did this verse teach that God “chose” (aorist indicative), but that the object of this choosing was to “salvation” (contrary to the position of some Arminians that God’s election is of the believer either to sanctification or to glorification). Then, a few years ago, as I was preparing to teach a class in the exegesis of the Thessalonian epistles, I was stricken by the fact that this verse occurs in a context that is dealing with the Day of the Lord. The Apostle Paul had just referred to the followers of the man of lawlessness who will be subject to the judgment of God associated with that time of tribulation. In such a context, might it not be that Paul was actually expressing his thanks that, in contrast to the followers of the man of lawlessness, God had chosen to deliver the church from the judgments of the Day of the Lord? If such were the case, then 2 Thessalonians 2:13 was actually another verse supportive of a Pretribulational Rapture position.

### *Semantics and Theological Understanding*

As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, what goes through our minds when we read the words, “God has chosen you for salvation”? The term “salvation” is a fairly heavily loaded term in the semantics of modern conservative theology. At least from the time of the Reformation, the term has carried with it the connotation of quite a few distinct, though related, theological concepts, including: justification, forgiveness, regeneration, redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, etc. For example, the term “salvation” occurs over 400 times in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and is used quite broadly to refer to all that Christ has accomplished through His death and resurrection on behalf of the

believer.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in most Reformation and Post-Reformation conservative Christian writings, the term “salvation” carries with it this broad semantic weight. But are we safe in assuming that in the early days of the Christian church, when the Apostle Paul penned his two epistles to the Thessalonian believers, the term σωτηρία (*soteria*) carried the same semantic weight? A consideration of semantics, discourse structure and immediate context will show that Paul’s use of the term σωτηρία (*soteria*) was indeed a reference to the pretribulational rapture of the church.

## Semantics

We have alluded to the semantic weight carried by the English term “salvation” in modern times, but what of the semantic weight borne by the Greek term σωτηρία that Paul employed in 2 Thessalonians 2:13? Can we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century come to an understanding of what this term meant to Paul and his Thessalonian disciples? In the following paragraphs diachronic considerations, conceptual considerations and synchronic considerations will be brought to bear on the answer to this question.

*1. Diachronic Considerations.* An overview of how the word σωτηρία was used throughout the history of literary Greek may be of some help. The term appears in Classical Greek as early as Herodotus (V BC), and means consistently throughout the Classical era either, (1) deliverance from some peril, (2) preservation in a state of safety or security, (3) a way or means of safety, (4) a safe return from a voyage, (5) safe keeping or preservation of a thing, (6) a guarantee or security for the safe keeping of a thing (7) security against anxiety, or (8) bodily health or well-being.<sup>2</sup> TDNT summarizes some of the kinds of peril from which deliverance is wrought by use of the word σωτηρία in the classical era:

[In Classical Greek] σώζω and σωτηρία mean first “to save” and “salvation” in the sense of an acutely dynamic act in which gods or men snatch others by force from serious peril. In this use, found from Hom. to the latest period, σώζω corresponds to Hbr. **יָשַׁע** .... Among the dangers *war ... and sea-voyages ...* always play a special part. Things are similar with σωτηρία... σώζω also denotes “deliverance” from *judicial condemnation, ...* The sense “to save from *an illness,*” hence “to cure,” occurs... In relation to the gen. perils of battle and sailing σώζω may have more of the sense “to keep” or “to protect.”<sup>3</sup>

More relevant to New Testament studies may be the use of σωτηρία in the Septuagint. Here we find that the vast majority of uses refer to deliverance from some sort of temporal peril, not too different from its use in Classical Greek. The Hebrew word **יְשׁוּעָה** (*yeshu‘ah*) most frequently lies behind the Septuagint’s use of σωτηρία. Of the 78 occurrences of **יְשׁוּעָה** in the Old Testament, the following kinds of deliverance are typical:

<sup>1</sup> As, for example, in his “Prefatory Address to the King of France,” Calvin states: “Before God there remains nothing of which we can glory save only his mercy, by which, without any merit of our own, we are admitted to the hope of eternal salvation (lat. *salvi*).” By way of contrast, the *Institutes* refers to “justification” about 200 times, “forgiveness” 188 times, “redemption” 91 times, “propitiation” 76 times and “reconciliation” 43 times.

<sup>2</sup> Liddell, Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940) s.v. σωτηρία.

<sup>3</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976). 7:966. Emphasis mine.

- Deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian army by crossing the Red Sea (Ex. 14:13; 15:12; Ps. 78:22)
- Deliverance of Hannah from her enemies (1 Sa. 2:1)
- Deliverance of Israel from various Gentile enemies
  - the Philistines (1 Sa. 14:45; Is. 12:2)
  - the Syrians (2 Sa. 10:11)
  - the Ammonites (2 Sa. 10:11; 2 Chr. 20:17; Is 12:2)
  - the Moabites (2 Chr. 20:17; Ps. 80:2, 6; Is. 12:2; 25:9, 10)
  - the Edomites (2 Chr. 20:17; Ps. 80:2, 6; Is. 12:2)
  - the Assyrians (Is. 33:2, 6)
  - unspecified Gentile enemies (1 Chr. 16:23; Ps. 44:2-3; 53:6; 98:2-3; 118:14, 15, 21; 149:4, 8; Is 26:1, 18)
- Deliverance of Israel from poverty (Ps. 106:4-5)
- Deliverance of David from the hand of Saul (2 Sa. 22:51)
- Deliverance of the Psalmist (frequently David) from various enemies, such as the evil man, the ungodly man, the fool, the one who digs a pit, etc. (Ps. 3:2, 7-8; 9:13-14; 13:4-5; 14:1, 4, 7; 18:48-50; 21:1, 5, 8-12; 28:3, 8; 35:3, 7-9; 42:3-5, 10-11; 43:1-5; 62:1-6; 68:19-21; 69:29; 70:2-4; 74:12; 89:26; 91:16; 119:123, 161-166; 140:1, 7)
- Deliverance of the Psalmist from physical illness or death (Ps. 88:1; 116:13; 119:155, 174-175)
- Deliverance of Christ from the cross (Ps. 22:1)
- Deliverance of Jonah from the fish (Jonah 2:9)

In Job, **יְשׁוּעָה** occurs two times. Deliverance is more personal and perhaps spiritual (13:16), but it cannot be separated from the idea of deliverance from his physical maladies, financial and familial ruin and personal enemies (30:15 “My welfare [**יְשׁוּעָה**] i.e. prosperity] is passed away as a cloud.”).

TDNT sums up the Septuagint’s use of σωτηρία as follows:

Deliverance, help and salvation come in favour of persons in situations which are often brought about by the hostile intent of other persons.... Human acts of deliverance are expected from military heroes, judges, and Nazirites (Ju 13:5)... Deliverance is also sought from the protecting power; this is for vassals the positive aspect of suzerainty, cf. 2 K. 16:7, Hos. 14:4. Above all, giving help and dispensing justice is one of the tasks of the king (cf. 2 S. 14:4; 2 K. 6:26) which is regarded as laid on him by God and whose discharge secures a happy and prosperous life for the people (Ps. 72:2 f., 12).<sup>4</sup>

In the prophets, especially Isaiah, salvation is frequently seen in the context of the eschatological reign of the Messiah. This salvation is often presented simply in terms of Israel’s experiencing deliverance from her enemies (Ps. 89:26; Is 12:2-3; 25:9; 52:7, 10; 60:18). But at times, this

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<sup>4</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:973-974.

eschatological salvation involves redemptive elements related to the righteousness and regeneration associated with the new covenant (Is. 49:6, 8; 51:6, 8; 56:1; 59:11; 62:1). In several of the references to spiritual salvation, there is still reference to deliverance from physical enemies (Is. 59:11, 17).

The intertestamental period sees a usage very similar to that of the Old Testament prophets. For example, in 1 Enoch, "... the idea of being saved occurs in reference to the flood. But the idea occurs most frequently in statements to the effect that the ungodly have no salvation or hope of salvation."<sup>5</sup> And in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, "salvation is applied to the individual in both temporal deliverance ... and eternal salvation."<sup>6</sup> When salvation is seen as eschatological in the intertestamental literature, it is typically a salvation that involves the deliverance of God's people from threat of warfare and hatred on the earth. However, on occasion, salvation is viewed as "the eternal salvation" which stands opposed to "eternal punishment, in which the wicked are cast into the fire. The godly individual attains salvation by his prayers and piety and by God's help."<sup>7</sup>

In the literature of Qumran, personal salvation is frequently seen in terms of God's deliverance of the godly man either from ungodly men or from the perils and distresses of this life:

The Hymns testify to the experiences enjoyed by the one who trusts in the help of God: "Thou hast saved me from the zeal of lying interpreters, and from the congregation of those who seek smooth things" (1QH 2:32). "I will praise Him when distress is unleashed and will magnify Him also because of His salvation" (1QS 10:17; cf.; 1QH 5:11 f.; 11:23 f.).<sup>8</sup>

When salvation is spoken of eschatologically in the Qumranic literature, it is in terms of national salvation for Israel and is coupled with the destruction of the nations of wickedness.<sup>9</sup>

Coming a bit closer to the New Testament era, Moulton and Milligan's review of the papyri reveals that "σωτηρία is common ... in the general sense of 'bodily health,' 'well-being,' 'safety.'"<sup>10</sup> This usage in the papyri is seen to be reflected in only a limited number of New Testament verses (e.g., Ac. 27:34; Heb. 11:7). Moulton and Milligan note that the sense of σωτηρία in the papyri forms a marked contrast with its normal use in the New Testament: "As a rule, however, σωτηρία in the NT, following its OT application ... came to denote Messianic and spiritual salvation, either as a present possession (Lk 1:77 *al.*), or as to be realized fully hereafter (Rom 13:11 *al.*)."<sup>11</sup>

In the New Testament itself σωτηρία is used in two ways:<sup>12</sup> (1) deliverance from danger or impending death (Ac. 7: 25; 27:34; Heb. 11:7; Lk. 1:71), or (2) spiritual salvation of the soul by virtue of the atonement of Christ (Phil. 1:28, 2 Cor. 7:10; 1 Pe. 1:9; 2:2; Eph. 1:13; Ac. 13:26; 16:17).

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<sup>5</sup> *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) Vol. III:209-210.

<sup>6</sup> *NIDNTT*, 210.

<sup>7</sup> *NIDNTT*, 210.

<sup>8</sup> *NIDNTT*, 210.

<sup>9</sup> *NIDNTT*, 210-11.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930), 622.

<sup>11</sup> Moulton and Milligan, 622.

<sup>12</sup> W. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker, & W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). 801.

“σωτηρία is plainly expected to be fully culminated w. the second coming of the Lord Ro 13:11; Hb 9:28; 1 Pt 1:5.”<sup>13</sup>

2. *Conceptual Considerations.* As has been shown from the preceding survey of the historical usage, σωτηρία can bear the meaning of “deliverance” in two distinct senses: (1) deliverance from temporal danger (enemies, sickness, poverty, physical danger, war, etc.) and (2) deliverance from spiritual danger (deliverance of one’s soul from hell, deliverance from the present dark age into the eschatological age of Messiah’s rule, deliverance into the new covenant and a state involving God’s righteousness, etc.). Though it may run the risk of being overly simplistic, let us refer to these two senses as: *temporal salvation* and *spiritual salvation*. In the Old Testament, clearly the vast majority of occurrences of σωτηρία are in reference to temporal salvation, with relatively few references to spiritual salvation. In the New Testament we find just the opposite – the majority of references are to spiritual salvation, with relatively few references to temporal salvation.<sup>14</sup> In both Testaments there are some references that combine both concepts; i.e., the spiritual salvation involves some form of deliverance from either enemies or some form of physical/temporal danger. An example of this combination can be seen in descriptions of Israel’s salvation in the Millennium where she experiences both God’s righteousness and a state of peace and freedom from her enemies. A pretribulational rapture, likewise, would involve such a combination “salvation” in which the culmination of our salvation at the rapture would also result in our being delivered from the persecution and worldwide judgments of the Day of the Lord. As such, there would be nothing inconsistent about σωτηρία in 2 Thessalonian 2:13 referring to a pretribulational rapture, neither would this rule out a partial reference to spiritual salvation.<sup>15</sup>

3. *Synchronic Considerations.* The New Testament was written over a period of almost 60 years and at the hands of at least eight different human authors. The precise sense of a given word can vary significantly over the span of such a time and from author to author.<sup>16</sup> Those who are over 60 years of age can doubtless think of a good many English words that bear a different sense today than they did 50 or 60 years ago. All languages undergo such changes, and there is no reason to believe that ancient Greek was any different. Thus it is incumbent upon us to focus our attention on the use of σωτηρία during the time in which Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians. Furthermore, one author may tend to use a word with a certain emphasis or shade of meaning that another author will not use. Thus, our focus needs to be not only on the time of the writing of 2 Thessalonians, but on the usage of this term by Paul. The apostle Paul wrote his New Testament epistles over a period of roughly 20 years. Even 20 years is long enough a period of time not only for the meaning of a word to change (Think of how some English words were used 20 years ago as contrasted with today!) but for that meaning to change even as used by the same author. Not all words will undergo such a change in meaning or emphasis, but some will. I believe that the word σωτηρία underwent just such a change in emphasis within the vocabulary of Paul over the 20 year span of his New Testament writings.

<sup>13</sup> Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, Bauer, 801.

<sup>14</sup> Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, Bauer, 801. “quite predom[inantly] *salvation*, which the true religion bestows.”

<sup>15</sup> Such a conception may also lie behind the otherwise difficult passage in 2 Thess 1:5-10. This passage is taken by posttribulational rapturists as supportive of their position, but it need not be seen that way. The rapture delivers the godly over to rest, but delivers the ungodly over to a period of judgment that will culminate in the personal return of Christ.

<sup>16</sup> P. Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989) 26.

2 Thessalonians falls into a group of epistles sometimes referred to as the “early Pauline epistles”: Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Galatians was likely written shortly after Paul’s first missionary journey (ca. AD 48), 1 & 2 Thessalonians were written from Corinth during his second missionary journey (ca. AD 51). In his early epistles Paul does not appear to use the noun σωτηρία to express the concept of spiritual “salvation” -- i.e. the positional work of God that takes place in a believer at the point of belief in Jesus. He probably uses the cognate verb σώζω once in this sense (1 Thess. 2:16), and once likely in reference to deliverance from the wrath of the Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:10). [N.B. There are also no occurrences of σωτηρία in the book of James, the only other New Testament book likely written in the same era as the early Pauline epistles.] Rather, to express the concept of spiritual salvation in his early epistles, Paul uses the following 24 terms and expressions:

1. καλέω (*kaleo*) call, Gal. 1:6, 15; 1 Thess. 2:12; 4:7; 5:24; 2 Thess. 2:14
2. δικαιόω (*dikaio-oe*) justify, Gal. 2:16, 17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4
3. δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*) righteousness, Gal. 2:21; 3:21; 5:5
4. ἐξαγοράζω (*exagorazo*) redeem, Gal. 3:13; 4:5
5. γινῶναι θεόν (*gnonai theon*) to know God, Gal. 4:9; 2 Thess. 1:8
6. γνωσθῆναι ὑπὸ θεοῦ (*gnosthenai hupo Theou*) to be known by God, Gal. 4:9
7. ἐξαιρέω (*exaire-oe*) rescue, Gal. 1:4
8. λαβεῖν τὸ Πνεῦμα (*labein to Pneuma*) to receive the Spirit, Gal. 3:2
9. λογίσασθαι εἰς δικαιοσύνην (*logisasthai eis dikaiosune*) to be reckoned unto righteousness, Gal. 3:6
10. εἶναι υἱὸς Ἀβραάμ (*einai huios Abra-am*) to be a son of Abraham, Gal. 3:7
11. [ἔχειν τὸ] κληρονομίαν (*echein to kleronomian*) [to have the] inheritance, Gal. 3:18
12. ζωοποιῆσαι (*zoe-opoiesai*) to give life, Gal. 3:21
13. εἶναι υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (*einai huion tou Theou*) to be a son of God, Gal. 3:26
14. βαπτισθῆναι εἰς Χριστὸν (*baptisthenai eis Christon*) to be baptized into Christ, Gal. 3:27
15. ἀπολαβεῖν τὴν υἰοθεσίαν (*apolabein ten huithesian*) to receive the adoption, Gal. 4:5
16. εἶναι τέκνον ἐπαγγελίας (*einai teknon epangelias*) to be a child of promise, Gal. 4:28
17. ἐλευθερόω (*eleuthero-oe*) to set free, Gal. 5:1
18. κληρονομήσαι βασιλείαν θεοῦ (*kleronomesai basileian Theou*) to inherit [the] kingdom of God, Gal. 5:21
19. ζῆν (*zen*) to live, Gal. 5:25
20. ἐκλογή (*ekloge*) election, 1 Thess. 1:4
21. ἐξεστρέψας πρὸς τὸν θεόν (*exestrepas pros ton Theon*) to turn to God, 1 Thess. 1:9

22. σωθῆναι (*sothenai*) to be saved, 1 Thess. 2:16

23. δέξασθαι λόγον θεοῦ (*dexasthai logon Theou*) to receive the Word of God, 1 Thess. 2:13

24. πιστεύσαι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ (*pisteusai te aletheia*) to believe the truth, 2 Thess. 2:12

σωτηρία does not occur even once in the book of Galatians, and occurs only twice in 1 Thessalonians. Both occurrences in 1 Thessalonians (5:8, 9) probably refer to the temporal salvation that results from a pretribulational rapture, i.e., deliverance from the wrath of the Day of the Lord. The only occurrence of σωτηρία in 2 Thessalonians is in the verse we are examining. The similarity of language between 1 Thessalonians 5:9 and 2 Thessalonians 2:13 is somewhat striking:

1 Thessalonians 5:9

ἔθετο ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ... εἰς περιποίησιν σωτηρίας

God appointed us ... unto an obtaining of deliverance [from the Day of the Lord]

2 Thessalonians 2:13

εἴλατο ὑμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ... εἰς σωτηρίαν

God chose you ... unto deliverance [from the Day of the Lord]

Thus, in view of the history of Paul's usage of σωτηρία up to this point in his extant letters, it would not seem likely that he is referring to the soteriological ideas of justification, forgiveness, etc.

Of the three early Pauline epistles (Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians), the one that has a distinctive soteriological theme is the very one that does not use the term σωτηρία! The Thessalonian epistles, on the other hand, clearly have a different theme. Almost all expositors agree that the primary theme of the Thessalonian epistles is eschatological.<sup>17</sup> Every chapter in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians has at least one reference to the return of Christ, and both books have extended discourses on eschatological themes (the Rapture in 1 Thess. 4:13-18, the Day of the Lord in 1 Thess. 5 and 2 Thess. 2). So, when we encounter the term σωτηρία in 2 Thessalonians, we would expect to understand it in a way that corresponds with the prevailing eschatological theme of the epistle, rather than presuming a soteriological theme.

The next extant letter of Paul's written after 2 Thessalonians was probably 1 Corinthians, written 3-4 years later. During this intervening period Paul had stopped briefly in Ephesus, gone to Jerusalem, then begun his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey and was making an extended stay in Ephesus while he wrote his first epistle to Corinth. The term σωτηρία does not occur at all in 1 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians, written shortly after 1 Corinthians, uses the term σωτηρία three times (1:6; 6:2; 7:10). It is here that we probably find Paul's first use of the noun σωτηρία in the sense of spiritual salvation. It is possible that it was during Paul's extended teaching ministry at Ephesus that the term σωτηρία began to take on added semantic weight in the vocabulary of Paul. In Romans, written in

<sup>17</sup> Mal Couch, *The Hope of Christ's Return* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2001) 17-18; John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (London: Mac Millan & Co., 1877) 53-54; J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (Hendrickson Publishers, 3<sup>rd</sup> printing 1995) 16-17; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians NICNT rev. ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 11; Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959) 7; Robert L. Thomas, *1, 2 Thessalonians, 1, 2 Timothy, Titus EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 7-8.

about AD 57-58, σωτηρία is used five times (1:16; 10:1, 10; 11:11; 13:11), each time as a reference to spiritual salvation.

Thus it appears that in the early Pauline epistles, we should expect σωτηρία to reflect the kind of “salvation” that is more akin to the Old Testament sense of deliverance from some temporal peril than to a later Christian understanding of broader redemptive themes.

## Discourse Structure of 2 Thessalonians 2

Up to this point, we have been considering the meaning of a single term, σωτηρία. We have seen that it is both possible and likely that when Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, he would have used the term with a greater emphasis on temporal salvation than on spiritual salvation. However, this is by no means a necessary conclusion based on semantics alone. Words have genuine meaning only in a context. Crucial to the question of whether σωτηρία in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 is a reference to the rapture is the related question of whether verses 13-17 are a continuation of verses 1-12 or the beginning of a new topic.

Some commentators have taken the words: Ἡμεῖς δὲ ὀφείλομεν εὐχαριστεῖν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοὶ ἠγαπημένοι ὑπὸ κυρίου, ὅτι ... (“But we ought to give thanks to God always for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because ...”) in 2:13 to introduce a new discourse, i.e., a significant change in topic. Two discourse features could suggest a shift in topic: (1) the conjunction δὲ (“now” or “but”), and (2) the insertion of the vocative ἀδελφοὶ (“brothers”). There are two compelling reasons, however, to see verses 1-17 as one entire discourse without a major division: (1) Paul’s use of an *inclusio* in verses 2 and 15, and (2) the chiasmic structure of the discourse.

### 1. Paul’s *Inclusio*, verses 2 & 15

We find in verse 15 what appears to be the second half of an *inclusio* that ties the last verses of chapter 2 with the earlier portion of the chapter.

2:2     μήτε διὰ πνεύματος μήτε διὰ λόγου μήτε δι’ ἐπιστολῆς ὡς δι’ ἡμῶν  
           “whether by spirit or by word or by letter as from us”

2:15    εἴτε διὰ λόγου εἴτε δι’ ἐπιστολῆς ἡμῶν  
           “whether by word or by our letter”

Thus, 2:15 is still a part of the discourse that was begun in 2:1. The δέ and ἀδελφοὶ of 2:13 do not indicate that Paul has moved on to a new subject. 2:15-17, introduced by ἄρα οὖν (“therefore,” the only occurrence of οὖν in 2 Thess), makes a fitting conclusion to this discussion of the troubling times of the Day of the Lord.

Note also, if we see the passage as extending all the way through verse 17, the similarity between how Paul ends his rapture passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 with how he ends this eschatological passage:



|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 Thessalonians 4:18  | 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17   |
| Ὡστε παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τούτοις.             | Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς καὶ [ὁ] θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν ... 17 παρακαλέσαι ὑμῶν τὰς καρδίας ... ἐν παντὶ ... λόγῳ ἀγαθῷ.. |
| So then, <b>comfort</b> one another with these <b>words</b> . | Now may our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father ... <b>comfort</b> your hearts ... in every good <b>word</b> .                   |

## 2. Chiastic Structure:

Charles Powell has written about the chiastic structure of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-15.<sup>18</sup> According to Powell, the section can be analyzed as follows:

- A Warning (vv. 1-3a)
- B The apostasy (v. 3b)
- C The revelation of the man of lawlessness (vv. 3c-5)
- D The restrainer (vv. 5-7)
- C' The revelation and annihilation of the lawless one (vv. 8-9)
- B' The leading astray of unbelievers (vv. 10-12)
- A' Thanksgiving and exhortation (vv. 13-15)

If Powell's chiasm is correct, it suggests two observations relevant to our discussion: (1) Verse 13 does not begin a new discourse, but continues the discussion begun in verse 1; thus, the "salvation" of verse 13 should be understood in the context of 2:1-12. This corresponds with what we have been saying about the *inclusio* διὰ λόγου εἴτε δι' ἐπιστολῆς ἡμῶν ("through word or through our letter"). (2) More specifically, the language of verses 13-15 should find some explicit parallel to the language of verses 1-3a. A comparison of these two sections demonstrates that such is indeed the case:

<sup>18</sup> Charles E. Powell, "The Identity of the 'Restrainer' in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1997) 154:615, pp. 322-28.

| 2 Thess 2:1-3a  | 2 Thess 2:13-15  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ἐρωτῶμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί,</li> <li>b. ὑπὲρ τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ’ αὐτὸν</li> <li>c. <sup>2</sup> εἰς τὸ μὴ ταχέως σαλευθῆναι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ νοῦς μηδὲ θροεῖσθαι,</li> <li>d. μήτε διὰ πνεύματος μήτε διὰ λόγου μήτε δι’ ἐπιστολῆς ὡς δι’ ἡμῶν,</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ἡμεῖς δὲ ὀφείλομεν εὐχαριστεῖν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοὶ ...</li> <li>b. ... σωτηρίαν ... περιποίησιν δόξης τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.</li> <li>c. <sup>15</sup> ... στήκετε, καὶ κρατεῖτε τὰς παραδόσεις ἃς ἐδιδάχθητε</li> <li>d. εἴτε διὰ λόγου εἴτε δι’ ἐπιστολῆς ἡμῶν.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. We ask you, brothers</li> <li>b. The coming of our Lord Jesus, and our gathering together to Him</li> <li>c. Be not soon shaken in your mind nor troubled</li> <li>d. Whether by spirit or by word or by letter as from us</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. We give thanks to God for you, brothers</li> <li>b. ... deliverance ... the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ</li> <li>c. Stand fast and hold the teachings which you were taught</li> <li>d. Whether by word or by our letter</li> </ul>  |

An examination of the discourse structure of 2 Thessalonians 2 suggests that verses 13-17 form a conclusion to verses 1-12, not a new and separate topic. As such, these verses are designed to give words of comfort to the Thessalonian believers in the face of the disturbing descriptions of the reign of the man of lawlessness and of the judgments of God poured out on his followers. Such comfort comes from Paul’s assurance that the Thessalonian believers have been chosen for deliverance from that distressing period of time.

### Immediate Context of 2 Thessalonians 2:13

The preceding section on “Discourse Structure” considered the context of the entire chapter. Now I would like to focus on the more immediate context of the wording of verses 13 and 14. In particular, two expressions occurring in this immediate context help us to determine the sense of the term σωτηρία: (1) the word εἴλατο (“chosen”), and (2) the phrase εἰς περιποίησιν δόξης τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“unto the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”). A third item from the immediate context also needs some explanation, (3) the expression ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος καὶ πίστει ἀληθείας (“by sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth”).

1. εἴλατο (“chosen”), v. 13. This word may in fact be the biggest stumbling block for many to see σωτηρία as a reference to the rapture. Particularly for someone from a Calvinistic persuasion, the word “chosen” suggests a theme of spiritual salvation. “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14);

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you” (Jn. 15:16); “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4); “He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful” (Rev. 17:14); “Knowing, brothers beloved by God, *His* choice of you” (1Thess. 1:4).

However, we should not be too hasty in basing our decision on the English translation. In fact, apart from 2 Thessalonians 2:13, every verse in the New Testament that refers to God’s sovereign choice of believers to spiritual salvation uses a *different* Greek word than the one used in this verse. The Greek words used elsewhere of God’s choice to spiritual salvation are κλητός (*kletos*, Matt. 22:14), ἐκλέγομαι (*eklegomai*, Jn. 15:16; Eph 1:4); ἐκλεκτός (*eklektos*, Rev. 17:14); and ἐκλογή (*ekloge*, 1Thess. 1:4). Of the words in this list, perhaps the most significant is that which occurs in 1 Thessalonians 1:4. If Paul were to refer to God’s choice to spiritual salvation in 2 Thessalonians, we might expect him to use the same word he had used in 1 Thessalonians. But the term εἴλατο from 2 Thessalonians 2:13 (aor. midd. of αἶρέω) is not in any way cognate to the term ἐκλογή in 1 Thessalonians 1:4. In fact, the only other New Testament occurrences of this word (only two other times in the NT) have nothing to do with election to spiritual salvation:

Philippians 1:22 “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.”

Hebrews 11:25 “[Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter] choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”

So, instead of the word “chosen” leading us to think of God’s sovereign election to spiritual salvation, we find that the very Greek word used by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 is *not* the word we would have expected him to use in reference to spiritual salvation. If, on the other hand, Paul had meant to refer to God’s choice to deliver the Thessalonians from the Day of the Lord, it would make sense for him to use a different word than the one he had used in 1 Thessalonians 1:4, and that, in fact, is just what he did.

2. εἰς περιποίησιν δόξης τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“unto the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”), v. 14. The end of this deliverance (σωτηρία) is explicitly stated to be “The obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This appears *prima facie* not to be a reference to our positional justification, but to our future glorification, which will occur at the rapture. It is at the rapture that Paul says, “We will be changed ... corruption must put on incorruption ... mortality must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:51, 53). It is at the rapture that Paul says, “He will transform the body of our humility conformed to the body of His glory” (Phil 3:21). If this phrase in verse 14 is *not* a reference to the rapture, then I don’t know to what it does refer!<sup>19</sup> And if it *is* a reference to the rapture, then I should not be surprised to find that the deliverance to which Paul refers in verse 13 should also be a reference to the rapture.

3. ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος καὶ πίστει ἀληθείας (“by sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth”). This expression might also lead one to the conclusion that this verse has a soteriological theme, and that, therefore, the term σωτηρία ought to be understood in terms of spiritual salvation. This

<sup>19</sup> For an example of the kind of confusion that results from eisegesis by those whose theology predisposes them to a soteriological view, rather than an eschatological view, see Eadie’s comment on this expression in v. 14, “The clause is ... perhaps not a mere exact specification of εἰς σωτηρίαν, or a giving of the final aspect and consummation of σωτηρία.” Eadie, 205.

would come from seeing “sanctification of the Spirit” as referring to positional sanctification, and “belief of the truth” as referring to faith in the message of the Gospel. Let us consider the two parts of this expression separately:

a) *Sanctification of the Spirit*. The preposition ἐν most likely relates this phrase as an expression of means to εἰλατο (“chosen”).<sup>20</sup> So the expositor must explain how the sanctification of the spirit brings about salvation. In soteriological terms, it is more usual to see things the other way around – to understand salvation being the means of sanctification. But it all depends on whether it is *positional* sanctification or *experiential* sanctification that is in view. If one understands the choosing in this verse to be God’s election to spiritual salvation in eternity past, then one is forced to the same conclusion as Ryrie, “On God’s part, being saved involves the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying or setting apart the believer. This is a reference to that sanctification *of the position* which every Christian has the moment he believes (1 Cor. 6:11, ASV).”<sup>21</sup>

However, if the choosing is for deliverance from the judgments of the Tribulation Period, there are two possible explanations: (1) The sanctification of the Spirit might refer to a setting apart of the believer from the Day of the Lord. This would be a nice explanation in keeping with the position taken in this paper. Unfortunately, the meaning of ἁγιασμός probably cannot be pressed into referring to a physical separation. Despite the fact that this noun is cognate to a word that means “to set apart, to separate,” (ἁγιάζω) in both classical and Hellenistic Greek the term exclusively means “holiness, consecration, sanctification.”<sup>22</sup> (2) The other explanation is to see simply an example of the combination type of salvation that was seen earlier in our survey of the OT prophets. In other words, spiritual salvation includes a deliverance from earthly disasters. In this sense, the sanctification of the Spirit could still refer to positional sanctification. Paul would simply be saying, “Those who will be delivered from the Tribulation Period are only those who have been sanctified (positionally) by the Spirit.”

b) *Belief of the truth*. This expression may in fact mean “belief in the gospel,”<sup>23</sup> but in this context, it also includes something more. As Lightfoot notes, the acceptance of the truth here is “in contrast to οἱ μὴ πιστεύσαντες τῇ ἀληθείᾳ [‘those who did not believe the truth’] ver. 12.”<sup>24</sup> Eadie makes essentially the same observation, “... there being an implied contrast to the previous πιστεῦσαι τῷ ψεύδει [‘to believe the lie’ verse 11]”<sup>25</sup>

2:11 And because of this, God sends them a working of deception so that they believe the lie,

2:12 In order that they might all be judged who did not believe the truth but took pleasure in wickedness.

<sup>20</sup> Couch, *The Hope of Christ’s Return*, 233; Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, 120; Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 116. On the other hand, Thomas explains ἐν as expressing “a locative instead of an instrumental force ... because the clause names an act in eternity past.... ἐν indicates the spiritual state in which God chose them to salvation,” *EBC*, 103.

<sup>21</sup> Ryrie 116 emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> BAGD 9; Liddell, Scott, Jones 9.

<sup>23</sup> Couch 233; Eadie 204; Ryrie 116.

<sup>24</sup> Lightfoot 120.

<sup>25</sup> Eadie 204.

In other words, the belief Paul is describing in verse 13 is in contrast to what the followers of the man of lawlessness believe in verses 11 and 12. Belief in the lie results in suffering the judgments of the Tribulation Period; whereas, belief in the truth results in salvation from the judgments of the Tribulation Period. One cannot believe the gospel and also accept the lie of the antichrist. The gospel offers Jesus as the Savior; the lie offers the antichrist as the savior.

## **Conclusion**

In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul had just concluded his prophetic description of the career of the man of lawlessness during the Day of the Lord. This included not only a description of the activities of this wicked man (vv. 4-10), but a pronouncement of God's judgment on his followers (vv. 11-12). It is at this point that Paul expresses his thanks to God for God's having chosen the Thessalonian believers to σωτηρία ("salvation/deliverance"). A study of 2 Thessalonians 2:13 in the light of semantics, discourse structure and the immediate context has demonstrated that σωτηρία here refers to the promise of deliverance from the persecution and worldwide judgments of the Day of the Lord that is implicit in the doctrine of a pretribulational rapture of the church. Such a view is consistent with what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, also dealing with the Day of the Lord, and is consistent with what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 regarding the comfort offered by the doctrine of the rapture.

In light of these findings, 2 Thessalonians 2:13 may be paraphrased as follows:

"We ought to thank God always for you, brothers, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you, a firstfruit of the European mission, for deliverance by means of the rapture from the judgments that shall befall those who follow the man of lawlessness in the Tribulation Period. God made this choice by setting you who believe the truth apart from those who will believe the antichrist's lie."