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Sermon: “God’s Destiny for Us” (I Thessalonians 5:9-10)

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Today I’m preaching from the fifth chapter of Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, which many scholars believe was Paul’s earliest letter, written around 50 AD. The church at Thessalonica was founded by Paul during his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-9), and the believers there, like many of us, struggled with their understanding of various aspects of the Christian faith, particularly the resurrection and the Second Coming. In response to these struggles Paul wrote to clarify these issues and encourage them in their faith.

One of the topics of the fifth chapter of I Thessalonians is destiny. Destiny has to do with how the events of our lives fit together and what the future holds for us.

Some childhood prodigies seem destined for greatness. Most high school yearbooks include pictures of those voted “most likely to succeed.” Some people seem to have fortunate destinies; others tragic ones.

Destiny is one of the main themes of the classic 1994 Oscar-winning film, *Forrest Gump*. Early in the film the young Forrest asks his mom, “What’s my destiny, Mama?” to which she responds, “You’re gonna have to figure that out for yourself.”

Later in the film another character, Lieutenant Dan, who had believed his destiny was to die in the glory of battle but had been rescued by Forrest, is recuperating in a veteran’s hospital, having had both legs amputated. One night he angrily yells at Forrest about how his destiny had not unfolded according to his plan:

“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 conclusion of the film *Forrest* is standing at the grave of his wife, and says, “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.”

This film hit a nerve for many people, because at different times in our lives we may feel like our destinies are up to us, or that we are indeed “just floating around accidental-like on a breeze.” At other times we experience seasons in our lives in which, like Lieutenant Dan, we think, “This wasn't supposed to happen. Not to me. I had a destiny.”

Some view one's destiny as being completely up to the individual. William Jennings Bryan—the famous politician of the late 19th/early 20th century, was of this ilk, declaring with great confidence, “Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for: it is a thing to be achieved.” Many people agree with this. It's great fodder for motivational speeches. Of course, things still didn't go according Bryan's plan, for he ran for the presidency three times and lost each time.

Sigmund Freud had a more concise and focused view on the topic of destiny, writing simply: “Anatomy is destiny.” Thank you, Siggy ☺.

In verses 9-10 of I Thessalonians 5 Paul writes about destiny, and differs significantly with *Forrest Gump*, William Jennings Bryan and even Sigmund Freud as he wrote the following, “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 has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This ties into what is known as the doctrine of predestination, a doctrine that makes many people in the church squirm, not exactly a topic for coffee hour. And yet predestination is biblical. In the back of *The Book of Common Prayer* under the section, “Historical Documents of the Church” (not to be confused a different section, the always funny “Hysterical Documents of the Church” ☺) you can find

the Thirty-nine Articles, the classic doctrinal statement of the English Reformation. Article 17 states the following about predestination:

“Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret... 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” (BCP 871).

Notice how Article 17 begins, “Predestination *to Life* is the everlasting purpose of God.” That is exactly what we see in I Thessalonians 5: “God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And this truth is not intended to foster paranoia or cynicism, but rather, as Article 17 puts it, “sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort.”

Often people squirm when it comes to predestination because they focus on the idea of people being predestined to hell. Speaking of a preoccupation with hell, back in the late 90’s there was a flea market operator in Kingsville, Texas named Leonoso Canales, who led a campaign to change the greeting “hello” into “heaveno” (I’m not making this up): “I see ‘hell’ in the word ‘hello,’” he wrote, “It’s disguised by the ‘o,’ but once you see it, it will slap you in the face” ☺.

Similarly people often see “hell” when it comes to the doctrine of predestination, and sometimes confuse the doctrine of predestination with what is known as *double*-predestination, that God has predestined some to heaven and others to hell. In other words, double predestination is the idea that Christ only died on the cross for the sins of the elect and that God has created some people and predestined them to hell to his glory.

This is not found in the Bible. The Bible is clear that Christ died on the cross for *all* of us, that God wants no one to perish but *all* to come to repentance, and that Christ suffered once for *all*, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. In his book on the Thirty-nine Articles, Anglican bishop and scholar John Rodgers describes this:

“There is no teaching of predestination to hell in Article 17 or in Scripture. Hell is a destiny mankind has chosen for itself in the Fall. And we, as children of Adam, reiterate the Fall by our own sin. Anglicans have generally held that a doctrine of predestination unto Hell, or double predestination, is a false teaching. To teach that God created persons in order to condemn them, so as to have occasion to reveal his justice, is foreign to Scripture, dishonors God, and is a false doctrine. Predestination to life... is good news for sinners” (*Essential Truths for Christians*, p. 337).

Again, the good news is that God has predestined us to life, that again, as Paul wrote in today’s passage: “God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And yet unfortunately there are some people who may refuse God’s gift of life through Jesus Christ. There are some who, like the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, would rather skip the party of grace and stand alone in the courtyard, arms crossed in self-righteousness. But the Bible is clear that God has predestined us to life, not death.

I must confess that years ago I put a lot more stock in free will than predestination, but after years of experience in life and ministry—both good and bad—I’ve come to maintain a very low view of free will and an increasingly high view of God’s sovereignty. I think the gifted preacher T. D. Jakes got it right when he said, “If you live long enough, life will shut your mouth.”

One of my favorite country music albums is Martina McBride’s 2006 album, *Waking Up Laughing*. The final song is called “Love Land,” a beautiful ballad about how God worked out the destiny of a young lady with a checkered past. The song concludes, “Only God could have planned the steps I’ve taken that led me to where I am, Love Land.” Sometimes you can look back on parts of your life and think, “Only God could have worked that out, thank You, God.” That’s true for me anyway.

Paul then writes that we receive salvation and life “through Jesus Christ, who died for us.” The phrase “for us” means “in our behalf” or “in our place.” When Jesus died on the cross for us, He endured the wrath due us in our place, on our behalf. When Jesus died for us, it was a “life for life” transaction, His life for ours.

The end of the 2004 film *Man on Fire* brilliantly portrays what a “life for life” transaction looks like. In this film, which is based on a true story, Denzel Washington plays John Creasy, a former CIA operative who is hired to protect a nine-year old girl named Pita, played by Dakota Fanning, who is from a wealthy Mexican family. Under his watch Pita is kidnapped and at the end of the film John accepts the terms for her release, literally exchanging his life for hers. John walks across a bridge and hands himself over to Pita’s captors, who simultaneously set Pita free to walk the opposite direction across the bridge and be reunited with her mom. It’s an incredibly powerful and moving image of life for life. And it really happened.

Jesus died for us, life for life. And this life with God to which we are predestined is to be experienced both now and in heaven, or as Paul puts it in today’s passage, “so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.” We remember this every time we celebrate Holy Communion as the celebrant offers the bread and wine to the congregation with the invitation: “This Gifts of God for the People of God, take them in remembrance that Christ died for *you*...”.

The fact that God has destined us to life, not wrath, gives us hope, and in I Thessalonians 5 Paul compares the hope of salvation, the hope that God indeed has destined us to life not wrath, to a helmet: “Put on... for a helmet the hope of salvation,” he writes. Similarly in his description of the “armor of God” in his Letter to the Ephesians Paul writes, “Take the helmet of salvation.”

Unfortunately when it comes to the hope of our salvation, to the hope that God has destined us for life not wrath we sometimes misplace our helmet, like NFL Hall of Fame running back Thurman Thomas. When the Buffalo Bills played the Washington Redskins in Super Bowl XXVI guess what Thurman Thomas did? He lost his helmet during warm-ups and the game was well underway by the time Thurman Thomas and his helmet were reunited. Even a Hall of Fame football player can lose his helmet sometimes, even during a Super Bowl.

Speaking of the importance of helmets, one November about ten years ago when I was serving at a church in South Carolina we did a high school fall retreat in the mountains, and the camp where we stayed had a zip-line that went out over a lake. The way it worked was you put on a life-vest and helmet and you held on to the

zip-line and ran down a ramp as fast as you could and then hummed along over the lake at a fast speed. Eventually you were supposed to let go of the zip-line and drop into the lake and then swim to shore. One of the boys on the trip, a nice kid but not exactly the sharpest tack in the box ☺, took his turn on the zip-line. The problem was he forgot he was supposed to let go and drop into the lake. I vividly remember watching in horror as he kept humming along the zip-line all the way to end, crashing into the tree around which the zip-line was tied. “That’s a rough ride!” he exclaimed as he groggily stood up. When everyone realized he was okay we all laughed. Helmets can come in handy.

We need the helmet of the hope of salvation because we tend to forget to let go of the zip-line, because we want to cling to the illusion that we are in ultimate control of our destinies, and often when we do that, we crash.

The good news of the gospel is that God gives us the helmet of salvation, that God has destined us to life, not wrath, because Jesus Christ died *for us* to make that possible, life for life. It really happened.

John Stott, the brilliant Anglican scholar who died last summer, puts it this way: “Our future salvation depends on God’s purpose... It stands firmly on the solid rock of God’s will and Christ’s death, not on the shifting sands of our own performance or feelings” (*The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 114).

So what about your destiny? Perhaps you’re young and feel destined to great things and eager to get out there and make it happen, or perhaps you feel like Lieutenant Dan, like you have endured some “This wasn’t supposed to happen” experiences in your life. Or perhaps you’ve misplaced your helmet.

The good news of the gospel is that “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.”

The good news is that God’s destiny for us does not rest on the “shifting sands of our own performance or feelings” but on His will. The good news is that because Jesus died for us, one day we’ll find ourselves in heaven, also known as Love Land. In the meantime, may the Holy Spirit brand this truth in our hearts and give us “sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort.” Amen.