

Standing Firm

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to go back to 2 Thessalonians, that section that we read from the middle of chapter 2 through to chapter 3.

It'd be quite good at some points to have the text up, actually, since most people don't have their Bibles with them. Or either that or look it up on your phone. It's quite handy to have it there.

But I just want, I know you all know this, but I just want to remind ourselves that when we come to God's Word, whether in church or when you read the Bible on your phone or you read it at home, whatever it might be, that we're coming to a living Word.

So it was good to remember that. So when I preach, I believe the living Word of God can speak into every heart here this evening.

I don't know you. Oh, well, I know a lot of you. But I don't know your hearts and you don't know mine. But the great thing is, and always kind of the most encouraging thing that a preacher ever hears, is not when someone says, oh, that was a great sermon.

[1 : 12] Because that usually just is either flattery or it may be we're listening for the wrong reasons sometimes, or maybe it's just a compliment.

But when someone says, I think I've said this again before, but that God spoke powerfully from that message into a situation that I'm dealing with or something like that, that's always an amazing thing.

Because I think for us, the challenge so often is honesty, both between ourselves, but more importantly, honesty with God, which is a strange thing, isn't it?

Because God is eternal and God is infinite and God sees into our hearts. And it's the strangest thing to try and hide things from God. Maybe not so strange to hide things from each other, but to hide things from God.

What a strange thing to do because he sees into our hearts. So honesty is something that should be critical in our relationship with God. But also honesty with one another, because I think sometimes we give the impression as Christians that we don't struggle, that we don't have battles, or that it is wrong to do that and we shouldn't have.

[2 : 19] And everyone should find joy and faith and obedience really easy in the Christian life. And when you don't, you struggle. When you see other people who seem to always have it together as Christians, maybe in church or at city group or just in your Christian friendships, you find that very hard.

And you feel that your Christian life might be driven by guilt or driven by duty and not by grace and by love. When you feel like that, you... And others are doing well, you...

Or you think they're doing well, you kind of withdraw, don't you? And that's an easy thing to do. We withdraw, we isolate from one another. And then we drift because we haven't been and we aren't being honest with one another and possibly with God as well.

And when we drift from the gospel and from grace and from God, then we become very vulnerable in our lives. So in that spirit of honesty, I'm going to say that I struggled this week.

It was a difficult week spiritually for no particular reason, maybe a spiritual attack of some kind. Not sure what happens with these things. But the entireness comes into that and exacerbates it.

[3 : 28] So there's very little brain space, very little time to sit back and reflect and think about things. And the sense of relentlessness sometimes of ministry, of fresh ideas, of fresh thinking and preaching and delivery and pastoral work and everything that happens makes life difficult.

And that added with the uncertainties of the world that we're in just now, the COVID world and this new strain, the Omicron strain, the cost of living, the social anxieties, fragility of democracy.

The difficulty you feel there's going to be for Christians, what will it mean for our Christians standing, the impossibility sometimes of faith and of evangelism and the worry that we have, and I have for people and loved ones who don't know Jesus and who aren't saved.

And all of these things lead to battle, don't they? And I suspect that you will have had battles this week, maybe many similar ones or maybe many different ones.

And this New Testament church in Thessalonica, they also had battles to face and we've looked at that over the last number of weeks. And especially over the last couple of weeks, we've looked at the second letter and they were questioning the word of God that had come through the apostles.

[4 : 55] They were struggling with it and other people were coming in with other thoughts and they were being persecuted and that was difficult. And they even wondered if Jesus had returned and maybe had abandoned them and they'd missed out on something.

And the world in which they lived was so lawless, what was the point of Jesus coming if the world stayed still so lawless and loveless? And so they also had battles and struggles.

And I think if we're honest, every Christian has battles and struggles, they have great times as well. And we can have great times in the battles and struggles, and that's a very important truth.

So I think it's important for us to see how God through Paul answers these struggles and battles that they had. And I believe God then in His living words speaks into our lives with the same truth.

The situations are different, but the message is the same and the gospel is the same and God's truth is the same for us as well. So what are we going to learn from God's word this evening?

[5 : 56] Well, I think what we learn, there's two kind of really important things. I think that we learn both His truth and how we respond to His truth.

So the reality is for us that God holds us in the grip, and I'm speaking here to Christians, God holds us in the grip of His solid rock truth, or even His rock solid truth either way.

God holds us in His grip. In verse 15 He says, So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm, hold on to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

This word, tradition here, is an important word because it's really speaking about the truth that's been passed down to them. And at this stage, it was a pretty new tradition because it was the apostolic teaching on the back of the Old Testament word of God.

And here, He's speaking very much about the apostolic teaching, which He knows is from God, which He knows is authoritative because He's been given it as one of the apostles of God, whether it was orally or by letter.

[7 : 12] And that was what they were to hold on to. And we know that Jesus, John 1 tells us, we've said this before, in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

So we have Jesus described as this communication, this word that was given to people, this, and He becomes the tradition that they were to hold on to. And that's what Paul is really going to emphasize here.

He's going to tell the people, keep on believing what you've been told. Hold on to it, stand on it, be strong on this tradition. What are some of the things? There's four things here, four things here that is the solid rock truth, the Thessalonian church and the St. Columbia church today needs to hold on to.

And you as an individual Christian needs to hold on to when things are difficult and we're battling and struggling. The first is that you have been chosen as a Christian from the very beginning, verse 13.

God chose you from the very beginning or His first fruits, two different translations, to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. So this evening, you are part of God's plan as a Christian and you've always been part of God's plan.

[8 : 23] There's never been a moment when you haven't been in God's mind and haven't been part of God's plan. Right there at the very core of the universe as a believer, right through the Old Testament, through creation, through the Old Testament, through the life of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection and ascension, you've been at the core of that.

You've always been in His mind because you've been chosen. You've been chosen before you were born, when you were born, as you were living. Now as you're getting older, some of you are getting older, some of you are still very young.

Right through to the day of your death and on into eternity, you've been chosen by God. That's the first thing. The second thing is that the triune God is committed to your salvation.

I love this section because it speaks about God, the Father God, the Son and God, the Holy Spirit in relation to God's people and their work for God's people. So in verse 13, it says you were saved through sanctification by the Spirit.

And then in verse 16, it says, now may the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who we know is God the Son, and God the Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace.

[9 : 36] So you've got this great triumvirate of divine persons who are committed to your salvation and committed to your being part of His family.

The three most significant persons, the one God in the universe, all that power, all that creativity, all that knowledge, all that justice, all that love, all that we attribute to the Trinitarian purpose and will and activity of God is centered around His people and is centered around you this evening.

He is utterly committed to you. Now, there's some trainee preachers here, and people always say to trainee preachers, you must have good illustrations.

So I came to this point this morning and I thought, but really good to have a good illustration about this. I couldn't think of any. I couldn't think of any illustrations.

How can you describe the commitment of the triune God from all eternity to save you and me? It's incomparable.

[10 : 47] It's exceedingly above and beyond what we could ask or even imagine. I can't think of anything to illustrate it with. I'll maybe try and have an illustration a bit later on.

But sometimes the truth is, they say truth is stranger in fiction, but certainly truth is greater than illustration, and sometimes it's impossible to make better or make clearer this great truth.

So we're chosen from the beginning. The triune God is committed to your salvation and to mine. It's not just in our hands. It's not just in our hands.

It's not just we battle and struggle on alone. We have this commitment. The third thing is we share in His glory.

We share in the glory of the crucified and risen Savior. Verse 14, to this He called you through our gospel so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[11 : 45] That's an amazing truth. We share the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Okay, I hear I'll try an illustration. It's a really poor one, but it might help you. You're saying, Bol, he's the fastest man who ever lived.

And you can imagine when he got the very best of his gold medals, when he broke all the records and he comes onto the podium having broken all the records, he's become super famous and he gets the gold medal.

And what does he do? He takes the little girl that holds his tracksuit at the beginning of the race onto the podium with him. He's the greatest glory and he gives her the gold medal and he gives her half of his winnings.

Okay, it's not a great example, is it? But you times it by a million and that's what we have as believers. We share the glory of the risen Savior.

That is that you and I, and this is what we're asked to hold on to, you remember, by faith. We share his victory over death.

[12 : 55] We share the eternal life that is in him. We share the honor he has in the heavenly places. We share the privileges that will be his and that are his.

We share association with him, the risen and glorified Savior. God, the Father treats us as like sons and daughters of the King. And it's not a faded glory.

It's not a memorial glory. It's a glory we have now and it's a glory we will share, an ever-present glory in eternity.

Great partnership of unequals. So you and I this evening, when we battle and when we struggle, we sometimes want things that maybe we think are more tangible.

But God wants us to keep going back to these things that by faith he tells us that we have. He holds on. We are chosen from the beginning.

[13 : 50] The triune God is committed to taking us home, committed to our salvation. We share the glory of the crucified and risen Savior. And the last thing is in terms of this rock on which we stand here, the truth is much more obviously, is that we are loved eternally by the Father.

Verse 16, now, may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace. And also then 3, verse 5, the last verse we read, may the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

You know it's like when you walk into a room where you know there's people there who don't like you or who you've fallen out with, might even be family members, there's a grievance between you, maybe you've done something wrong, but you've never dealt with it before them.

And so there's a real unease if you know you're coming into their company. Or maybe you're coming somewhere else where you sense that you're not welcome, there's a resentment and maybe even, God forbid, maybe even hatred, isn't that a terrible thing?

To come into a room with that pretty, you really feel uncomfortable. You don't want to be there. You don't want to sit down. You're not going to relax in that company.

[15 : 21] That's everything that being a Christian is not in God's presence. That we are loved eternally by the Father, and that should change the way we come into His presence entirely.

We don't come into the presence of a grumpy old bearded God who grumbles and complains at our failure. We don't come into the presence of someone who's judging and nagging and who's resentful of us.

We don't come into the presence of one with whom we have unresolved division that's been dealt with by Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. That's a great place to come into because we're loved eternally.

We're safe, it's positive, we're forgiven, we're recipients of grace. We need to let that soak into our hearts.

And it then changes our view of ourselves and also changes our view of our faith and changes our view of the world in which we live. It gives us strength and perseverance that the Father loves us and will always love us.

[16 : 29] And that really is the core of our Christian lives because if we don't grasp the love of God for us, what we find is that we continue to live with disordered loves because that's the problem really, that's the idolatry we have, it's the core of the sin we have.

It's not usually for us, it's not wild, terrible, evil, brutal things we do to one another or by one another. It's usually that our loves are in the wrong place.

Disordered loves. We put our loves for ourselves and loves for whatever it might be before our love for God because we don't understand so often and grasp the commitment of His love for us.

But there's great damages done by disordered loves when we put the right things in the wrong place and when these things matter to us much more than anything else.

And it often means we see our lives in a very shallow and simplistic way. And so we need to be educated in the gospel truth.

[17 : 44] We need to keep going back. Sometimes I would love to just be telling you something dramatically new and wonderfully fresh and uniquely wow.

But really this stuff should be, shouldn't it, for us? Because God keeps telling you, and Paul keeps saying, I desire to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified. And then I keep thinking, well, is that relevant for people as they go into the workplace and as they serve?

Do they need something more tangible, something more practical, something more that they can grasp? No, I think if we can see the beauty of Jesus Christ and the glory of His love for us, that's the solid rock that keeps us standing.

It keeps us going. We're loved eternally by the Father that we share in the glory of the risen Son that the triune God has committed to us and that we've been chosen from the beginning.

These things will change how we walk and talk in the world that we go to. So that's the solid rock that is mentioned here by Paul, the solid rock truth on which we stand in our battles and our struggles.

[18 : 55] How do we respond to that? How do you respond and how am I to respond to these things? Does that will determine how we live our Christian lives and determines how fruitful and how contented we will be in our Christian lives?

Well, I think the first thing, obviously, and it's very obvious, is that we respond by hearing Him, by hearing His voice in the word preached or in the word that you read, that you're not just reading it through for the sake of reading it.

It's not just a ritual we go through, but each time we come to the word we're saying, God, what is it that you're saying? How do you want me to respond? What is it that I need to hear?

Because then as you see in that first section from 13 to 15, speaking to the brothers or the brothers and sisters in the church, speaking to them all.

So interestingly, He says, God chose you and He called you so that you may obtain, so then you may hold.

[20 : 04] Now each of these us is singular, although it's going out to the whole people. And He's saying, you, you, you, and you, and you.

See, the message is, God isn't interested really in a generic message or just a message that gets kind of thrown out to a church family to some impersonal crowd.

He wants each of us to open the word and He says, you, and you, and you, and you, and you. He's speaking into our lives and He wants, you know what that great picture of blessing is, isn't it, face to face with God, being face to face.

There's nothing more personal than being face to face with Him. It can be very awkward if you don't like people invading your personal space. But being face to face with someone is that, is that image of honesty and openness and personal commitment.

And we hear His voice, you know, and listen to what He's saying and take it and respond and allow Him to take it into our hearts to change us.

[21 : 10] You know, if I've had a meal, great meal, and I rise from the table and I haven't realized that there's a big blob of cream from the pudding on my beard.

And I just happen to pass a mirror and when I get to the mirror and I see it, I don't just walk away from it and just leave it the way it is, wipe it off, don't you?

You want to get rid of that. Or maybe your wife, your husband, or your brother or sister acts as a mirror for you and says, by the way, you've got a big blob of cream on your beard.

You want to deal with that before you go and see anyone. And the act is a mirror for you. And you know that the Bible tells us, it uses that illustration, it says the Bible is like a mirror into our soul and we're not to walk away from it unchanged, we're to let it expose the things that need to be exposed and we need to come to Him in confession and repentance for these things to be cleansed so that the cancer of sin is being dealt with in our lives and we're being sanctified.

So we hear His voice and we take, we allow Scripture to be a mirror. And each of us need to do that, you don't look in a mirror for someone else.

[22 : 31] You look in a mirror for yourself to see your own reflection and that is what we're to do from Scripture. So we hear His voice in Scripture. Then verse 15 tells us that we are to stand firm and hold on to the traditions that we've been taught.

It's a great picture, two pictures isn't it, hand and feet. Stand firm on the rock, hold on and grip powerfully to His truth.

Christ is that rock. I talked about that this morning at Cornerstone. God is our rock. And it is His truth that we stand on, isn't it?

That's what we... God is the Word incarnate. We need to know the Word. You know what, I love seeing the children here at night church.

Now they may be drawing and may not be listening but they're learning to come into God's house, with God's people and they'll learn to sit and they'll learn, we hope and pray, to listen and hear the Word of God in their lives.

[23 : 36] And that's what we want to do. We want to be people who know the truth and who stand firm and hold on, who soak it in His truth becomes our worldview, it becomes our perspective.

It's where we plant our feet so that we're not blown over. What was it? I can't remember the name of Hurricane this week, Hurricane Archie or something. And it was a wild one and lots of things blew over.

There was a whole forest blew over in Dunbar and there's lots of things that would blow us over in our lives. We have to plant our feet on the rock that is God and hold on to Him without letting go.

You know, it's not a kind of limp handshake we have with God. We're gripping on the dear life.

Jacob when he wrestled with God he said, well, not let go unless you bless me. And that is, we're not to presume on His grip, we're not to take this truth and say, well, God doesn't ever let me go.

[24 : 40] And one of His chosen and He's committed to us. It's quite the opposite. We don't presume on His grip but we hold on because we have that responsibility and we stand firm on the rock.

You know what it's like trying to walk, if you ever try to walk on a trampoline, it's a nightmare, or walk on skree, you know, at the side of a mountain where there's lots of loose stones, it's desperately difficult to keep standing or in marshland where there's bogs and stuff.

You just sink. And that's what it's like trying to be a Christian with a closed Bible, trying to be a Christian without soaking in the truth and without standing on the rock which is Jesus Christ.

And that's what we're asked to do. It's an act of faith and we're asked to do that in His name. Stand firm and hold on. And then the third thing, there was four things the first time, there's four things this time.

Third thing is speak and act well. Verse 17, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. So that's the opposite of taking the truth of God's word and saying, great, I can just relax because God's in control.

[26 : 02] But being chosen, being part of God's purpose, being indwelt by the Spirit, it doesn't deny our responsibility to live for Him. It heightens it and it transforms it because the motive is a changed heart.

We see His beauty, we see His love and we see the glory of the truth and that becomes the motive for speaking right and acting right in our lives.

And we need both, don't we? We need to live both ways. And dealing with the grumbling, complaining, criticizing, moaning, gossiping, bad mouthing that sometimes we engage in.

And also dealing with the act, loveless actions that sometimes are a part of our lives. We do things for the glory of God because it's good and because it's to serve Him as freedom, not to be praised, not out of cold duty, not out of fear or reward.

So we respond then by hearing His voice, by standing firm and holding on, by speaking and acting well and lastly by breathing the oxygen of prayer.

[27 : 12] Are you not surprised that that's there? Breathing the oxygen of prayer. Verse 13, it starts with prayer, we thank, we ought always to give thanks to God for you.

Verse 16, it is a prayer that He gives now, may the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God their Father who loved us and gave Himself for us comfort your hearts. And then in verse 3, chapter 3, verse 1, He says, finally brothers, pray for us.

Pray for us. So breathe the oxygen of prayer. So prayer is the bread in which the meat of the truth is the sandwich.

So we've been looking at the sandwich of truth tonight and the rock that is God, the bread that is at the top and the bottom of that is prayer.

And that is the sandwich that we eat. And we do so because it's the debt that we owe to God. That word ought, but we ought always to give thanks.

[28 : 14] It's a debt word. We've got a debt we owe to the living God. We offer it and we ask for it. We offer it for others.

Paul always prayed for his fellow Christians, but he also asked for it. And I want you to be a people who ask for prayer of each other and offer prayer to each other because we struggle and because we need prayer for each other and we need to offer prayer to each other.

It's so significant. Praying the truth, that's what Paul is wanting here, the truth into one another's lives.

And that includes a sense of thankfulness, doesn't it? He gives thanks for them. And he gives thanks for the solid rock of Christ at work in the lives of others.

So you know what? A nice thing to do is to see someone in the church and you give thanks to God for them and you tell them that. And you give thanks for the work of God in their lives, for the growth in grace, for their maturity in Christ, for the fact that they're growing, for the way they responded to something which showed that they were living and standing firmly rooted in Jesus Christ, giving thanks.

[29 : 33] But also praying like Paul prayed for gospel progress. That was his request, wasn't it, to that church in Thessalonica? He said, will you pray for us? Not that we'll not be persecuted, not that things will be easy, not that someone would give them lots of money so that they could have an easy life.

But that the gospel would progress. That the Lord, the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored. I love that phrase. He's wanting rapid progress.

That's great, open doors, good soil, converts, fruit. That's the heart that we have behind seven days of prayer that we've just finished. It's the heart behind the seven, the city group studies we've been looking at this year, Jesus' response to people and how we respond because we want lots of converts.

Why? Because that means less people in hell and more people in heaven. Gospel progress, it's a great prayer to make. And also protection, he prays for them, for protection in verse 2 of chapter 3, that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men for not all of faith, but the Lord is faithful.

He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. What a great prayer to be praying for ourselves, for your leaders, for the church, for one another, for the churches in Edinburgh, throughout the world.

[30 : 50] He's our good commander in chief. He's your good commander in chief. He will strengthen and protect you. It's the prayer that comes into the Lord's prayer as well, isn't it? To be spiritually aware within a battle.

Don't blame God. Don't blame circumstances, but recognize that there's a spiritual warfare that He's already defeated and will one day destroy.

But trust Him. Trust Him. Trust Him in your difficult circumstances and the darkness. Pray for gospel progress. Pray with thanksgiving as we respond to the rock truth on which we stand.

Amen, let's pray. I'm going to pray actually quite, I'm going to finish the quarter past because I wanted to pray through this quickly because that seemed appropriate.

So let's pray. Father God, we thank You tonight for who You are. We thank You for Your gospel. We thank You for Your truth. And tonight we stand on You as our rock.

[31 : 55] Sometimes we think the Bible is a bit irrelevant or it's just theoretical or it's theological truth and it doesn't impinge on my day-to-day life.

May we move from that deception and may we remember that as we see Your promises and we look back to Your work and we look forward to Your promises and we see what You've done in our lives, may we stand firmly on the solid rock which is the gospel, the truth, the Bible, the message, the person of Jesus Christ.

Lord, we thank You tonight that we've been chosen from the beginning, that God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is committed to our salvation, that we tonight, although we might not think it, we share the glory of a crucified and risen Savior we are eternally loved by the Father.

May these things help us to understand and have a perspective in the life we live. May we stand and respond by hearing Your voice, by listening to what You say, by standing firm, by holding on, by being in the grip of grace, but also gripping on to grace ourselves, by not being holding on loosely, by not being second cousins once removed to the living God, but to know You intimately, to know Your Word, to pray daily and to live in Your presence.

And in so doing that we go out into our working day, our student lives, our neighborhood, our home and we speak well and we act well.

[33 : 31] Help us Lord to do these things and help us to be people who breathe the oxygen of prayer. May St. Columbus be a body of people that breathe the oxygen of prayer together and individually.

May we be thankful for one another and for the progress of grace in our lives. May we pray for each other in the battles and the struggles and not be ashamed to ask for that.

We pray for gospel progress. We long to see people converted. We love to see baptism, see it at the front, not just of children, but of grown-ups who have come to faith and never been baptized. We long to see people from sparkle sisters and we long to see our neighbors and our friends and our colleagues.

We long to see those that have come maybe for the last six or seven years to the carol service. Not because there's anything magical about that, but because we believe it reflects our relationships that we have built over many years with people.

That these relationships will bear fruit, that we will speak well and act well into them and tell people about the gospel and that the seed would be sown into good hearts and that souls would be saved.

[34 : 39] And we pray, as we pray for one another, we pray for protection, the evil one. He is wiser than us and he knows the Bible better than us and he often comes as an angel of light.

We've seen that and we've talked about that. May we not be naive or glib or ignorant about his tactics, but remind us Lord God that he is a defeated foe, that he moves only under the authority of the sovereign God in his defeated reality.

And then the mystery of that enable us to seek protection and help and strength from you who promises, always promises to do that.

I pray particularly this evening for those who might be here who are battling and struggling, struggling with doubt or cold hearts or difficult circumstances, family or health, heard bad news, who are struggling with bad news, who are lonely, who are isolated, a million, a myriad of different things that might cause people here to be crying out inside even though they might put on a great and bright face in public.

We pray that they might hear your voice and your love and your grace this evening, especially from your word. I pray for the young people, I thank you for the children here, bless them we ask, bless them so that they will know Jesus from an early age.

[36 : 20] And I pray for the young adults and the students who will be at identity night and those maybe are unable to be there. We pray for them that they might find their lives on Jesus and on the rock that is him and his word.

We ask all in Jesus' precious name. Amen.