

WAITING FOR THE LORD'S RETURN, PART 9: "STAND FIRM"

2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-3:5

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Personal Introduction

Hi everyone. If you don't know me, I'm Jeff - one of the pastors at HMCC of Jakarta. And it's my privilege to be preaching the Word of God for us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently going through the books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians together in our sermon series called "Waiting for the Lord's Return."

Today, we'll be continuing with Part 9, titled "Stand Firm."

Before we get started, let me pray for us again...

Sermon Introduction

When I was younger, I watched this movie that really shook me... As a kid, I remember being scared of even going outside because of this movie.

Maybe some of you are already trying to guess what this movie is... I'll give you a hint: this movie wasn't about ghosts or demons, but it was about tornadoes or twisters.

Of course, I'm talking about the 1996 movie "Twister" (but not "Twisters" which is the new sequel that just came out in theaters recently). But "Twister" - it was about these giant tornadoes - large rotating columns of air that come down from the sky and touch the ground - with winds up to 300 kilometers per hour - and they shake, and blow away, and suck in anything and everything in its path (including houses, cars, and people).

As a kid, I'd never seen anything like that before. After watching the movie, I was glad that it was only a movie, but then I found out that these things actually exist in real life! So you can imagine how that would scare a kid! Or even adults!

Now, how about us today? In our day-to-day life, we may not be too worried about a literal tornado coming in to shake our lives. But perhaps we face our own "tornadoes" (so to speak) - something that comes up and causes us to be shaken or alarmed (whether it be something that's happening in our home, or in our workplace, or even in our church). Perhaps some of us are feeling shaken or overwhelmed today. Or even if we're not, then maybe we will some time in the future. So today's message is for all of us...

And that's basically what's happening in the church in Thessalonica, something just happened that caused them to be shaken and alarmed...

Scripture Introduction

If you have your Bibles with you, please turn to 2 Thessalonians 2. Last week, we took a look at verses 1-12.

And if we take a peek again at chapter 2 verse 2, remember that the young Thessalonian church had just received some false news (which seems to be from a false prophecy or a false letter that claimed to be from apostle Paul). It falsely says that the Day of the Lord has already come; that Lord Jesus has already returned!

Now, imagine that you're all these young Thessalonian Christians who've been waiting for the Lord's return even amidst persecution - so you've already been quite shaken... you've been dragged out of your homes, you've been made to stand in front of city officials - yet you've continued to remain steadfast in your faith (and you even remember Paul's teaching from his first letter to you - that when the Lord returns, you'll finally be with him forever, and you will have eternal peace and comfort). So then that helps you to continue to persevere in your faith...

But then now you're hearing that the Lord has already come... So what may be some thoughts on your mind? (on these Thessalonians' minds?) "Have we been left behind? Did our Lord abandon us? Are we not saved?"

So these Thessalonians were understandably shaken & alarmed at this time, and they're very likely confused & scared as well. And they're no longer sure of what's happening, and what will happen to them.

So in Paul's second letter to them, Paul instructed them not to be deceived by these false teachings. They're not from Paul, and they're certainly not from the Lord. Paul clarified that the Day of the Lord has not yet come. In fact, last week, we learned that before that day comes, there will be a "man of lawlessness" who will rise and proclaim himself to be God - and this false god will lead many people astray; many will reject the truth because of him, and they'll be deceived by his lies.

Well, to be honest, that's not the most encouraging news, but that should at least address the Thessalonians' misunderstanding - that should clarify that the Day of the Lord has not yet come. But Paul understands that the Thessalonians are still in need of some encouragement even after this misunderstanding has been clarified.

So now, in our passage today, we'll see Paul encouraging the Thessalonians by reminding them that they're not like those who've rejected the truth; because unlike them... they've believed in the truth. And he's encouraging them to remember that fact, and they're not to be shaken or alarmed by lies, but instead they're to stand firm and hold on to the truth that they've been taught!

And then later we'll learn that - as God's people - we are able to stand firm and hold on to the truth... not because of our own strength, but because God Himself will be the one to strengthen us to be able to remain firm in the truth that what we've been taught...

The One Thing

***Stand firm and hold on to the truth,
as God Himself strengthens us to remain firm.***

Scripture Reading

So let's read 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5 (ESV)

¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

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, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

³ Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

This is God's Word.

Overview

- I. God's people are to stand firm in the truth (2:13-15)
- II. God strengthens His people to remain firm in the truth (2:16-3:5)

I. God's people are to stand firm in the truth (2:13-15)

Look at verse 13 - Notice how it starts with the word "but." Now that's a linking word; that tells us that what Paul is about to say next is connected to what he previously just said. So what did Paul just say before this?

2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 (ESV)

⁹The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, 10 and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

So in the previous verses, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that it's actually Satan who's going to be working through the man of lawlessness, and their work... is through lies and deception to cause people to be shaken - to the point where they could be completely thrown off & refuse to believe in the truth; and instead, believe in what is false.

<pause>

I wonder, how is Satan trying to shake you today? What lies may he be whispering in your ears to try to get you to question the truth, and to believe in what is false instead?

We all may be going through various things. But whatever it is that may be causing you to be shaken or alarmed right now (whether it be something that's happening in your home, or in your workplace, or even in your church), Satan can take advantage of your struggles to try and get you to believe in lies instead of the truth...

So in light of what you may currently be going through, what lies have been whispered into your ears? What lies have been stuck in your minds for some time now?

- Perhaps the lies may have something to do with God...
 - a. (lies about how He doesn't care for you, how He may not be able to provide you with what you truly need, how he's not really with you, and how he's far away).
- Or the lies may have to do with you...
 - a. (that because God is far away... you're essentially alone and you're not cared for and not provided for, so then you need to do all you can to take control of your own life yourself).
- Or there may be other lies that are in your minds - some of them... we may be aware are lies, some we may not yet realize are actually lies.

But if it's anything that's leading you farther away from God, leading you away from God's people, and to believe merely in yourself (in your own strength and capabilities) or in something else other than God... then be very careful in thinking that those are not lies.

Because the goal of Satan's lies and deception is to get you away from God and His truths, and for you to hold on to anything else other than God's truths...

And that's what Satan was trying to do with the Thessalonians...

BUT...

And here comes the "but" in verse 13 - But the Thessalonians are not like those who refuse to believe in the truth.

Here Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they're not unbelievers, they are believers! And because they are believers, their identity and their future has been completely secured by the truths in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's the Gospel of Jesus that directly addresses their insecurities and concerns.

So let's take a closer look at verse 13 now - and notice How Paul encourages the Thessalonians with Gospel truths. So let's take a look at 3 possible concerns that the Thessalonians may have (which may very well be your own personal concerns as well), and then let's look at 3 truths that Paul encouraged them with.

First, maybe the Thessalonians were worried and asking themselves, "Have we been abandoned by the Lord? Maybe Jesus doesn't really care for us after all..."

- Maybe some of us are thinking that too...
- But that's a lie!
- Look at verse 13 - What's the truth? The truth is that - the Thessalonians are not abandoned - they are beloved by the Lord.
 - Brothers and sisters, maybe some of us need to be reminded of that right now... Lord Jesus loves you.
 - We certainly haven't been abandoned by the one who loves us... Actually it's quite the opposite...
 - We're the ones who abandoned God - From Adam and Eve at the Garden of Eden to me and you today... we've all sinned against God - turning away from Him and turning to other things instead (like: money, career, beauty, and success). These things become what we value and worship more than God.
 - But... even when we were still sinners, even when we didn't know and love God yet, even when we're deserving of God's wrath and eternal punishment in Hell because of our sins... even then... God did not abandon us.
 - In fact, the truth (the Gospel, the Good News) is that God came after us - He sent His one and only Son - Jesus Christ - to pursue after His people who have strayed away from Him.
 - Jesus - who is fully God, and fully man - came from Heaven to Earth to die on the cross for the sins of man, as our substitute.
 - So that those of us who believe in him as Lord and Savior will not be condemned and punished in Hell, but will gain eternal life & will be with Him forever in Heaven.
 - That's the Good News! That our Lord loves us so much that he couldn't just leave us behind, and instead came after us personally!

So the first truth is that we're beloved by the Lord... And he will not abandon those whom he loves.

Second, maybe the Thessalonians were concerned and asking themselves, "Are we not saved? Maybe we haven't done enough to be saved..."

- That's a lie!
- What's the truth? The truth is that their eternal future (and our eternal future) has already been secured. And it's not because of the good things we've already done or that we still need to do. But our eternal salvation has already been secured because of God's sovereign grace.
- Look again to verse 13 - God, who is sovereign and perfectly in control, has already chosen His people from the beginning of time to be saved!
 - In fact The Thessalonians were the firstfruits; they're one of the first Christians to be saved (and as firstfruits, they're a sign of a larger harvest that's still to come) - a sign that points to how many more believers in the future would be saved as well (including us today).
 - And this is a great reminder that we didn't earn our salvation by our good works (in fact, there's not enough good works that we can do to earn our salvation), but we've been given eternal life because - keep looking at verse 13 - because of our belief in the truth; because of our faith in the Gospel. That's what saved us - not our works but our faith.
 - Friends, this does imply that not everyone everywhere will be automatically saved, but only those who put their faith in Christ will be saved.
 - So if you haven't yet put your faith in Christ yet, I urge you to repent of your sins and to place your faith in Christ - because he is the only means of salvation.

So the second truth is that our salvation has been secured by God's sovereign grace... by God's grace alone through our faith alone in Christ alone... our salvation is secured and cannot be taken away from us.

Third, maybe the Thessalonians were uncertain about their future and asking themselves, "Maybe we're not going to Heaven after all..."

- That's a lie!
- Look at verse 14 - When Jesus Christ returns, His people will share in his glory; those of us who believe in him will indeed be given eternal life (and just like what Paul taught the Thessalonians in his first letter to them - when Christ returns, the dead will be resurrected and those who are alive when Jesus returns will welcome him back as he then establishes a New Heaven & a New Earth, where all of God's people will be together with him endlessly).

The third truth is that God's people will share in Christ' glory when he returns, and we'll truly be with God forever in Heaven.

<pause>

Imagine the Thessalonians hearing this letter read to them. And as they're reminded that their identities and future are secure in Christ... their anxieties and securities gradually begin to calm down as they're comforted. They can breathe again...

I hope that these truths have also been comforting for us - that because of the Gospel - the truth is that our future is secured.

<pause>

Look at verse 15 - So in light of these truths about who God is, truths about our new identity in Christ, and truths about the security of our eternal future... Paul instructs the Thessalonians to not be shaken by the enemy's lies. But instead they are to stand firm and hold on to these truths; hold on to the traditions that have been taught to them by the apostles (either in-person or by their letters).

To be clear here, what Paul is NOT referring to are traditions created by man that are merely thought of and created by people and are passed down generation after generation (Jesus himself warned the Pharisees and the Scribes about their man-made traditions that were not in accordance with God's Word). Paul is not talking about those man-made traditions, but he's specifically referring to the true teachings that were given to them from the apostles themselves.

And God's Word says that all Scripture; all of the Bible (including the letters from the apostles)... were divinely inspired by the Spirit of God Himself; and that every piece of Scripture is breathed out by God Himself. And so God's written Word that we have in our Bibles is as good as His spoken Word, and to be treated as such.

The Thessalonians themselves are actually aware of this, Paul has previously mentioned in his letter that he thanks God for them because they were able to receive Paul's teachings not as merely the word of man, but as the Word of God that Paul is merely a messenger of.

Paul is reminding them to not be shaken by the enemy's lies, but stand firm and hold on to the truth and teachings from God Himself, hold on to the Gospel that saves us and secures our eternal future.

<pause>

In the movie "Twister," there's a scene where a huge tornado was heading towards two people who were trapped and not able to go anywhere else. They're about to be blown away, and sucked into this vicious tornado. But before the tornado got to them, they saw this pipe that was firmly rooted into the ground, and they securely tied themselves unto it. And then as the tornado passed by them and blew everything else away... they firmly held onto this pipe for dear life. If their grip was too loose, they'll be blown away. If they let go, they'll be blown away. It's a matter of life or death. Imagine if you're in that situation with that tornado coming towards you, how firmly would you be holding on to that pipe.

Friends, that's how firmly we're to hold on to the Gospel, especially as the enemy's lies are viciously trying to blow us away. Brothers and sisters, whatever it is that you're currently going through at this time, God's Word reminds us today to stand firm and hold on to the Gospel and the Lord's teachings that we've been taught.

As I'm saying this to you, I'm aware that this is easier said than done. I need to preach this to myself, just as I'm preaching it to you. I know that it's not easy to stand firm at times when we're already completely shaken.

Because our sinful tendency is not to stand firm in the truth, and not to hold on to the truths in God's Word. But our tendency is to: (1) hold on to the Gospel loosely, and (2) hold on to other things firmly instead.

So let's ask ourselves: what are you most concerned about right now? Your job, your family, your finances, your appearance or reputation? It's certainly ok to think about those things, but what if they're merely ALL that we're worried about, then what does that tell you about what you're holding on to?

Does it show that you're holding on to the things that are eternal? Or does it show that your concerns are in what's worldly & temporary?

<pause>

Not too long ago, I went through my own "tornado" (so to speak), something that happened that completely shook me and tested my faith. Last year, some of you might've remembered seeing me with a serious acne breakout that I was struggling with on my face.

Honestly, that was a really tough time for me. The enemy definitely used that time to try and get me to be shaken and alarmed.

- So many lies were in my mind at that time:
 - That I'm not as worthy or valuable of a person when I'm not looking my best.
 - That I'm not a worthy Christian (because how can a Christian - especially a pastor - struggle with something as superficial as their physical appearance).
- And many questions in my head:
 - How can God let this happen to me?
 - Will God ever improve my condition?
 - What do I need to do to get this under control as soon as possible?!
- So many thoughts, lies, and insecurities were popping up...

At that time, it didn't even feel like I was able to stand firm and hold on at all. Actually, I felt like I was already being blown away, being tossed around inside this tornado. My mind was all over the place, jumbled up with the lies and the truths that were all bouncing around together and I wasn't sure which one was which.

But I know The Gospel, I know God's truths. I know that my eternal future is secure because of Jesus. But honestly, those promises just feel so far away to me at that time as I'm going through my personal struggles at that very moment.

It may be the same for you. As you're going through your struggles, you may know the Gospel but maybe it just seems kinda far away. Maybe we know that we should and need to stand firm in the truth. But how can we stand firm in our faith? Is it even possible?

Well, on our own... by our own strength... not really. But with God, now that's definitely possible. We'll take a look at that next.

So first, God's people are to stand firm and hold on to the truth. Second...

II. God strengthens His people to remain firm in the truth (2:16-3:5)

Look at chapter 2, verses 16-17 - After Paul instructed the Thessalonians to stand firm and hold on to the truth that they've been taught, he then turns to... prayer. Now that's very interesting, right?

After instructing the Thessalonians to stand firm and hold on to what they've been taught, you'd almost expect Paul to share his secret formula or his specific strategies on how they can accomplish those things. But instead, Paul simply turned to prayer.

- In the last 2 verses of chapter 2, he prays for the Thessalonians (that God may comfort their hearts - so that they may no longer be shaken and alarmed).
- Then in the first 2 verses of chapter 3, he asks for the Thessalonians to pray for him (that the Gospel message may spread without hindrance, and that they - as missionaries - may be protected from wickedness and evil).

So why is Paul turning to prayer?

Paul is turning to prayer because... he relies and depends on God. He's not relying on his own strength to be able to stand firm against wickedness and evil, and against the things that he's going through at that time... but he's relying and depending on God.

- And just so we understand what Paul has gone through up to this moment in time... he's gone through a lot!
 - He's been arrested and then whipped for sharing the Gospel in Philippi.
 - Then when he was in Thessalonica, he was driven out of the city by an angry mob who was pulling Christians out of their homes.
 - Paul understands what it's like to be shaken, and alarmed, and to have his faith tested.

And what does Paul do to remain firm in his faith? He prays - he continues to rely and depend on God.

<pause>

So maybe the next question we have is: What does Paul expect God to do?

Look at chapter 3, verse 3 - Paul trusts that God will be the one to *establish* us. This is actually the second time Paul uses the word "establish" here (he also used it in chapter 2, verse 17). The word "establish" also means "to strengthen" or "to make something firm."

That makes sense. Because when we think of something established, we think of something that's strong, and firm, and proven not to be easily shaken.

- Like a tree that's well established - it's deeply rooted into the soil (its roots spread deep and far), and it's not easily shaken. And it's proven to be firm (standing strong after tens and hundreds of years).
- Or like a company that's well established - it's deeply rooted in the market (its products and services spread far), and it's proven to be firm (standing strong after tens and hundreds of years). And they proudly display it in their company's logo: "Established in 1912."

How about a Christian who's well established?

- We have Paul as an example - His faith is deeply-rooted in the truth; not easily shaken by the enemy's lies even after years and years of trial after trial.

<pause>

So how can our faith be strengthened to stand firm?

James 1:2 (ESV)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

So it is through the trials themselves that our faith may be tested, and then strengthened and grown.

So the trials that we're going through are like opportunities to exercise our faith. As the enemy is testing us, tempting us, trying to shake us with lies - we're given opportunities to practice our faith.

That's when we're given an opportunity to do one of two things:

- (1) Either rely on God.
- (2) Or rely on something else other than God.

Friends, when we choose to rely on something else other than God, It would be like tying yourself to a loose pipe that's just laying there on the ground, and is not actually rooted into the ground.

- You may have comfort and hope for some time as you rely on yourself or on your abilities and resources, but that comfort and peace won't last forever.
- When something comes up to shake you, it would be as if you're not tied down to anything. You will be shaken, and you will be blown away.

What we truly need is an eternal source of comfort and hope that can survive even when all other smaller sources of comfort and hope seem to be gone. One that remains even when everything around us is completely dark.

Look at verse 5 - At times when we may be completely shaken, may God Himself strengthen our faith by directing our hearts to the steadfastness of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the one who is perfectly steadfast; who perfectly stands firm and does not shake.

When we go back to Christ and his Gospel again and again, we remind ourselves - again and again - that our identities and future are completely secure in Christ. Because when all other sources of comfort and hope are gone, the hope that we have in the Gospel of Christ will always be there.

- Even when we're most insecure and shaken, the Gospel of Christ remains true.
- Even when we're doubtful and losing hope, the Gospel of Christ remains true.
 - Our identity as God's beloved children who've been saved from our sins - that remains true.
 - Our future - eternally in Heaven with our God and our brothers and sisters in Christ - that remains true.

The devil and his lies and deception cannot stop the Gospel of Christ from being true.

- It can shake us, but it can not shake our Lord.
- And our immovable God is the one holding on to us firmly, strengthening & establishing us in Jesus Christ himself - the one who is perfectly steadfast.

And for those who remain steadfast in the Lord again and again (trial after trial), we'd be like a tree that's strengthened over time and proven to not easily shake.

- Though we will face heavy winds at times, and even though there will be difficult situations in the future, and even though there may be many lies whispered into our ears, we can remain firm & steadfast in the truth till our Lord truly returns...

<pause>

Finally, look at verse 4 - Paul is confident that the Thessalonian church will continue to do what they've been taught and commanded.

But notice what Paul says... He is confident... IN THE LORD. Now, he may very well be confident in the Thessalonians as well. But even more than that, he's confident in His Lord who is faithful, and who will continue to empower the Thessalonians to do the things they've been commanded.

And it's the same with me. As a church, we're going through a unique situation in our church's history. For the first time since our church was planted almost 9 years ago, we'll be without our lead pastor for the next 6 months. But during this upcoming time, I'm confident in our Lord; I'm confident that our Lord is faithful. That He will continue to do good work in and through our church. That He'll continue to empower our church to remain firm and hold on to what we've been taught, relying - not on our own strength - but on God's strength to help us remain steadfast in the truth amidst our trials.

Now, to help us with our next steps, there are 3 things I'd like to encourage us to do as a church...

1. Let's go to God in prayer.
2. Let's go to the truths in God's Word.
3. Let's go to our brothers and sisters in Christ

First, let's go to God in prayer - even when we're unsure of what to do amidst our struggles, I encourage you to start with prayer.

Prayer is powerful - it does something in you. It takes you from wherever you are, and it brings you before the almighty God. And then God starts to seem a bit closer and you start to be reminded of how small you are and how big God is... you start to be reminded of what's eternal... brothers and sisters, no matter what you're going through... that's a great place to start. So first, start with prayer.

Second, let's go to the truths in God's Word - It's going to be difficult to battle the enemy's lies if you're not surrounding yourself with the Gospel truth. So don't starve yourself of God's Word. Even if there may still be lies in your mind, at least it's not only lies in there. Keep attacking your mind with biblical truths.

Go to the Bible; read your Bibles. Because how can you know what's true and what's a lie if you don't go to God's Word to familiarize yourself with the truth first.

- It's been famously said that "Federal agents don't learn to spot counterfeit money by studying the counterfeits. They study genuine bills until they master the look of the real thing. Then when they see the bogus money they recognize it."
 - Similarly, we can catch lies and false teachings about God (and about ourselves) by really studying and knowing the true Gospel.

Third, let's go to our brothers and sisters in Christ - Just as the Thessalonians had Paul - who was able to remind them of Gospel truths... we also have each other to help remind us of the truth! We have each other to look at our blind spots and tell us of the lies that we may be believing in.

Last year, when I was struggling with my insecurities, I really couldn't go through that time on my own. I needed other's help to preach the Gospel truth to me - Pastor Eric, Pastor John, multiple brothers and sisters... They just listened to me, and reminded me of the Gospel. And they prayed for me.

- So I encourage you, whatever worries or concerns may be shaking you right now, do not isolate yourself. And please reach out to your brothers and sisters who can encourage you and point you back to the truth that we've been taught.

And then afterwards, I encourage you to take some time to reflect - really try to organize your mind and speak the Gospel truths to yourself. So if there are truths and lies bouncing around in your mind all at the same time - try to grab one thought at a time - and then label it... is that thought a truth from God's Word or is it a lie?

- So for me - there was this thought in my mind: "I'm not good and worthy because I'm struggling with this insecurity" - So was that truth or a lie? Well, what does the Gospel say?
 - Well, I am unworthy - that's true actually. Yet... My value and worth is not based on my own appearance or my reputation or what others think of me. It's based on God's steadfast love for me, and the steadfastness of Jesus Christ - and that's why my value and worth are stable and secure because it's centered on the Gospel - that's unchanging and remains true (even amidst my doubts).

- And then, guess what? Repeat that process for every thought... preach the Gospel to yourself; bring the Gospel closer and closer to you; stand firm and hold on to it for dear life!
- And don't be discouraged if you have to keep preaching the Gospel to yourself for the exact same thought again and again. Actually, keep doing it multiple times a day because we're so quick to forget the truth. Keep standing firm and holding on to the truth!

So let's stand firm and hold on to the truth by continuing to go to God in prayer, going to the truths in God's Word, and going to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And let's not forget that... ultimately, our God is the one who's firmly holding on to us, and strengthening us to stand firm in our faith.

The One Thing

***Stand firm and hold on to the truth,
as God Himself strengthens us to remain firm.***

Let's pray.