

Stand Firm and Hold Fast

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 (NIV)

¹³ But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. ¹⁶ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷ encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

“Stand firm and hold fast.” Someone says this to prepare you for what is about to come. They want you to be ready to resist something that has the potential of throwing you off balance, making you lose your footing – like when you’re standing at the door of the Fronrunner train as it comes to a stop. If you don’t somehow brace for it, the stop will make you lose your balance, maybe fall.

“Stand firm and hold fast” is good advice also for our faith. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonian Christians had some weighty topics in it. Already in Paul’s day, Christians were expecting Jesus to come again, to return for the Last Day, Judgment Day. Some started to teach the Thessalonian Christians that they had missed it, that Jesus had already come back. “Did Christ really already return? Did we miss it? Were we asleep at the wheel when we should have been watching for him?” It was a teaching that rattled them, throwing them off balance as they began to doubt what they believed.

What rattles your faith, makes you feel like you are losing your faith footing, that you are about to stumble and maybe even fall? I remember as a kid in grade school and then in high school of my mind asking, “What if the Bible is all made up? What if everything that I have come to know and believe in is just a work of fiction? What if God is not real?”

That’s only my mind asking those questions, almost unprompted by anything else. Nowadays, people give us reason to pause and evaluate whether what we believe is rock solid or not. Someone says, “The Bible has been corrupted. Sections have been lost.” Others say, “Look at all the contradictions. It’s obviously false.” Every now and again someone discovers something that supposedly disproves the Bible, and they claim the Christian Church covered up this dirty secret that they didn’t want anyone else to know. Someone else says that the stories of the Bible are too fantastical to be real, that they are made up by people who wanted to explain things that they didn’t understand. Now we have science to explain those things. And we ask ourselves, “Did we miss it? Were we lied to? Have we believed false information?”

We all have things that throw our faith off balance, that make us think that we missed something, but how do we respond and deal with them? For the Thessalonian Christians who were dealing with these things which throw us off balance some 2000 years ago, Paul wrote them letters and visited them. He wrote specifically to clarify God’s Word to them, whether or not Jesus had returned. “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3)

The answer to whether or not Jesus had returned and the Thessalonian Christians had missed it was a clear “no.” No, Jesus had not returned because Jesus’ return would be obvious to the whole world, as Paul wrote in his previous letter to them. On the day Jesus returns, every knee shall bow – believers and unbelievers. Unbelievers will no longer be able to deny Christ and his existence. The whole world would know when he returned. On top of that truth, two other things would happen. There would be a great rebellion – a great falling away from the faith – and the man of lawlessness - this person or entity which sets itself up in the place of God and from within the visible church – would be revealed. In Paul’s day, these things had not yet happened.

“So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.” (verse 15) Stand firm and hold fast! Don’t be thrown off by what other people are telling you because it does not line up with the clearly revealed Word of God. His Word is trustworthy and true. Stand firm and hold fast to it.

Why can you be certain of what God’s Word says? Why can you stand firm and hold fast to it? Because God chose you. He chose to love you, and out of that love he then “chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” (verse 13) He chose you to belong to him, to believe in him, to believe in the truth, the truth that he will not

leave you in this world with a flimsy message, a corruptible message that would make you doubt your God and your salvation. No, God said that he would keep all his promises, including those regarding the endurance of his Word and that he would come back and take you to be with him in heaven. This is God's Word that bolsters our faith in the face of doubts. This was the word that Paul had preached and wrote. This is the Word that God used to bring you to faith, to sanctify you, make you holy, cause you to believe in it as what it is – truth!

We hold firm to God's Word as truth first and foremost because he has brought us to believe it, to believe he has chosen us to belong to him, to believe that we are made holy, forgiven children of God. Yet, history also confirms and backs up what we believe. Someone says the Bible is corrupted. When you hear someone say that, ask them to prove it because history shows the Bible to be the most accurate and the most widely spread written document of its time period. It has not changed over time. That's simply history, history worth looking into. (You don't have to take my word for it.) Contradictions in the Bible are found when people divorce sentences from their context. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Let God speak for himself by comparing passages to each other, and you won't find contradictions. No council ever "created" the Bible. The Bible has always testified to itself and tested itself to what had come before. The Bible is God's Word not because some church said so, but because God said so. This means that what Paul taught the Thessalonians, he teaches to you today, still God's voice through his servant, an apostle, for you to hear.

What's more is that instead of giving us an apostle to speak his Word to us, he gives us each other. We are here to be the voice calling people back to God's revealed and trustworthy Word. This is why we gather together as a church, as a group of believers, to worship, to share in Communion, and to study the Scriptures. This is why we share fellowship time, eat meals together, get coffee together so that we can encourage each other to stand firm and hold fast to what God has taught us all, how God has called us through his Word to belong to him, to believe in him, a belief that the Holy Spirit has worked in all of us by means of his Word. We all worship the same God and belong to the same God because the same God has called each of us individually and brought us to faith in him.

As we gather together as brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, we hear God's direction for us through the voice of Paul. "We ought always to thank God for you." (verse 13) Look around this church. Everyone you see here is a reason to thank God. Thank God that these people that you sit by, he has brought them to faith in him. When was the last time that you told one of these brothers and sisters in Christ around you that you thank God for them? Have you told everyone here that you thank God for them? Thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord because God chose you. He chose you not because you deserved it but because he wanted to. He chose you to hear his Word and believe in it, to believe that he has done everything to take away your sins and make you a cherished member of his family destined for life everlasting in heaven. He chose you to belong to him so that you could call him your Lord Jesus Christ and God your Father. It's not just an "ought to always thank God for you" as if it's only an obligation or duty I have to do, but rather a mentality of how can I do anything but thank God for you because you are chosen by God, because God made you holy, because God made you stand firm and hold fast to his Word.

After you have thanked God for your brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, follow God's direction through the voice of Paul again. Paul prayed for his fellow Thessalonian believers. "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word." (verses 16-17) Pray for each other. Pray for them during the Prayer of the Church. Pray for them before worship and after worship. Pray for them when you offer your own personal prayers to God. Pray through the prayer requests as they are sent out via email, especially as we put five families a week in those prayer request e-mails. Pick up a member directory and start praying through the names because they are your brothers and sister in Christ, ones loved by the Lord just as you are. Thank God for bringing these people to faith in him and making them holy, sanctified.

As we do these things, as we thank God for these people around us who are loved by the Lord, as we pray to God for them, as we gather together, we will encourage each other to stand firm and hold fast to God's teachings, the same teachings the Thessalonian Christians held to, the same ones Paul held to. God has called us by means of his Word, the Bible. He has faithfully preserved that Word for us. Through it, he caused us to believe it and believe what he has done to take away our sins and bring us into his family. By God's Word, we know we are saved. With that trustworthy and true Word, we encourage one another in good hope to stand firm and hold fast to his true Word even in the face of doubts. Amen.