

Hold Fast
2 Thessalonians 2:13-17
4/14/2019
Randy Lovelace

I'd like to invite our children from four years old to 1st grade to the time of learning worship together as they follow along the worship service and are learning from the Lord's word together. As we turn this morning, we continue in the book of 2 Thessalonians. We finish the second chapter today, and we'll take a break for Easter and then return to finish it after that.

As some of you know, I grew up in the Carolinas. I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, lived there for the first nine years of my life. And then my father was transferred as he worked for Bell South Western Electric, during that day, in 1979. We moved to Columbia, South Carolina. But because I grew up in Charlotte, we never went to the Outer Banks like many of you, you go to the Outer Banks than many of us in North Carolina because if you're in central North Carolina, getting to the Outer Banks is very difficult. At least, it was back in the day.

So, the quickest way for us to get to the beach was to go to the low country of South Carolina. That's what we affectionately call Myrtle Beach all the way down to Charleston. And that was the place where I learned how to water ski. I learned how to water ski on what we call the creek. The creek is that portion of the sea water that flows between the barrier islands and the main land. And generally, it's a little less wavy and so forth. It's a good place, calm place, to learn how to water ski. And one of the things that they teach you early on is to hold on to the rope. I think you see where this might be going.

And so, I was on the back learning how to water ski, and I remember as I told myself the mantra, hold on. So, I got on my skis and the two things sticking up in the water, and I'm all hunched over. You know, you feel like you're really cool, but you just look really horrible. But you're hanging on, and then they hit the gas and you're holding on. And of course, it's a little too strong at first, so you let go. And they're like, no, keep hanging on, just let the boat pull you. I mean, I'm all of about 60 pounds wet at that point in my life, so it's not that hard. And so, I'm hanging on this time and I'm going to do it. And I hang on, and it pulls me up, and then I come right out of my skis. But I'm not letting go. And suddenly, they're yelling from the boat. And of course, with the water flowing by my head, all I hear is, "Let go!"

So, I'm here to tell you this morning, hold fast. The water gets a little rough. But that was the problem for the Thessalonica church. The water was getting very rough. And they were tempted to let go. Some around them had let go. False teachers had come in and contradicted what they had been taught by Paul. And so, as he is entering the finish of the letter, he does so with this brief section of prayer, blessing, and he commands them, and then he reminds them.

You'll see in your outline this morning as he calls them to hold fast, he leads them in this time. And he gives thanks, he calls them to stand firm, and he reminds them of enabling strength. Giving thanks, standing firm, enabling strength because the water is rough.

Hear now, the word of God as Paul wrote it to them.

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 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.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Father, there are many in this room who are experiencing storms in their lives. And so, they need to hear your word speaking to them to hold fast. But Lord, we need you to help us because without your enabling strength, we cannot hold. But we give you thanks that in fact, this word declares you hold us. So, Lord, we ask that you would teach us wonderful things in your word to strengthen, to comfort, that we might endure as we walk with you. As we remember that Palm Sunday as it is taught in your word that Jesus entered in humility, Lord, help us to receive this word with humility and may you enter in, by your Spirit, teach us and help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, we look together first as verses 13 and 14, this giving thanks, and it is a familiar prayer in that it is patterned even after the opening prayer that Paul gives in this second letter. Chapter 1:3 says, "We ought to always give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing." So, in similar fashion, yet with a twist, he comes back again to this theme of giving thanks when he says the following, "But we ought to always give thanks to God for you, brothers," so far, exactly the same except this phrase next, "beloved by the Lord." It's not that he didn't believe that in chapter 1, it's that he's bringing something else out. And now, because in the midst of their difficulty and trials, he's actually doing something. He's pronouncing a blessing in the midst of the prayer of giving thanks.

How do we know this? We know this because of when he says, "beloved by the Lord," that is acute. Now, whether any of them picked up on it at all, we don't know because we weren't there. But we do know that Paul is using something very specific to himself. He's using a blessing which was an ancestral blessing. It's an ancestral blessing for the Benjamites. Way back in Deuteronomy chapter 33, we have Moses praying and blessing the different tribes. And then in verse 12 when it gets to the Benjamites, it pronounces "beloved by the Lord." It doesn't say that about any other tribes. They have their own sort of blessing that is read by Moses.

But here, Paul is using the very same words that are used in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. And so, what we have here is that we have Paul saying, beloved by God. He's using his ancestral blessing which we know from his others is a great freedom from pride for him, but pride in a good way. He recognizes that the Lord has placed His love on him drawing him to Himself. And so, here he's using that Benjamite blessing for a group of Gentiles who have now been converted to Christ and following Him, and he says, "I give thanks to God, brothers, beloved by God." He's giving thanks and calling on God's love to be poured out on them.

We as recipients of this letter as the church of Jesus Christ and all those who believe, you need to hear that the first and foremost prayer that ought to ever be prayed over you is, you are beloved by God. It is not what you do. It is who He is and what He has done. Do you know that the king of glory considers you beloved?

Not only does he say, "brothers beloved by the Lord," he then says, "because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." It's important because as he's giving thanks and he's pronounced the blessing, now, he's giving them the perspective on their situation but not from a human perspective, but from how God sees it. How does God see their situation? He's just told them that there are those who have infiltrated their ranks and teaching them false doctrines regarding the return of the Lord. He's teaching them in the midst of persecution and trial because they're being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ and their walking with Him. He's talked about how their enemies of the Lord will meet their end, again, from God's perspective.

Now, he's saying, this is God's perspective on them, in the midst of all this trial and difficulty, you're the first fruits of His salvation. Meaning, you're coming to Him, His work in your life is a demonstration that God is victorious. You may see yourselves as defeated. You may see yourselves as downcast and degraded and discouraged and beat up. But that is not the Lord's view of you because He does not look at us through our momentary circumstances, He looks at us from the perspective of

eternity. You are the first fruits of His salvation. We who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who sit here this morning are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ because of this word which was written down, passed around the churches, kept because Paul was one of the apostles, he was one of the authors and it has been maintained throughout the history of the church. We aren't the first fruits, but we are the continual fruit of the Lord's work. We are not defined by our momentary circumstances. We are defined by the Lord of glory from all eternity who does not see this as the end game. The end game is who we are in Jesus Christ. We have received the fruit of His salvation. We have become the fruit of that salvation. The word is the seed, the spirit is the power, Christ is the focus. The Father's will has now come to us, and by God's grace we have believed. And therefore, we are the fruit of the seed which has been sown.

He is giving thanks because of what God has done. We can give thanks today for what God has done in us not because our circumstances always tell it, amen? But I encourage you, as I was speaking with someone this past week as they began to count the blessings of what was going on in their life even in the midst of a difficulty, they could still say that the Lord is here. Are you doing that? It's what the Lord is doing. It is His perspective, not ours.

He then says something else at the end of 13 and then in 14, which is an important shift for Paul as we look at this letter with his other letters. He says that you are "the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now, in the other epistles, Ephesians and Romans, Paul talks about how someone comes into a saving relationship with God. It is as was led this morning by elder Morrissey, which is it is by faith through grace through Christ Jesus alone. That's the "how" we are saved. But here, he makes a shift from how to the means. He's saying, from first to last that it is God's choosing, it is the spirit's power, it is the word of truth, and it is the Lord's calling that has made all of this possible. This is the emphasis. It's not just the how of by faith, but rather by whom. It isn't that we do not respond. We absolutely do respond. But it is by the one who has called us to Himself that it is possible. Beloved by God as the fruit of His salvation, and from beginning to end by His power from all eternity.

And then one final thing that he gives that is a tremendous shift. It's in these last words of verse 14, "so you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is an old biblical idea of the glory of the Lord. But the Lord doesn't share His glory with anybody else. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are full and equal of power and glory. He does not share with anyone else except those who come and are saved through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, we might obtain the glory of Jesus Christ. What does he mean? This glory he is speaking about is what gives Christ the glory. What gives Christ the glory? He enters into holy week in humility. He exits it in victory. He comes into it in humility. He exits it in victory. He goes low that he might be vindicated.

So now, watch how this works out in the Thessalonica church. They are in the midst of their low point, false teachers, others who are passing away and they are concerned about whether they will experience the resurrection of the Lord. Others are concerned that the resurrection has already happened. Maybe they've missed out. Persecution is happening all around them. And yet, Paul reminds them, the Lord has you. You are beloved by God. You are the fruit of His salvation. And He is the one who has done all of it so that you might obtain the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, that glory as we share in that exaltation. The end of the story is not defeat, it's victory.

Some of you need to hear that this morning. We can't define what that victory looks like. But the end of the story is not our brokenness. The end of the story is not the brokenness of our world. The end of the story is victory and exaltation. And this is what the Lord has done. It's not that we first and foremost hold fast to Him. It's that He has held fast to us. And from there, as he's established through this prayer of blessing and reminding and teaching, he's given them the indicative. Who they are, who they've been made to be. Then he turns in verse 15 to the imperative of standing firm.

Let's look at it together. Verse 15, he says, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold fast." The "standing firm" and "holding fast" are meant to be equal. They're holding together. The "holding fast" is a

nautical term, hence water skiing. Not really, but okay. But it is a nautical term. Being held fast together to the mast. Standing firm, having a firm foundation, not unfamiliar themes for Paul.

And so, he's encouraged them on the verge of their being shaken, he reminds them to stand firm. You have been drawn in together. Hold fast. But to what? He says, "to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter." Well, in that spoken word and the letter, he's taught them traditions. Now, it's important for us to understand what he means by traditions. He doesn't just mean any traditions. Actually, in most of Paul's letters where that word is used, it has a negative connotation because now that he's a follower of the Lord, those traditions were traditions of the Pharisees which he no longer holds to. They also use them in referring to the traditions of those who were Gentile in their tradition, and he says, but you have left those things. You are no longer following in those traditions. You've now been brought to Christ.

Except there's one place other than here where the word "traditions" is used positively. It's in 1 Corinthians 11:2 where he's talking about the Lord's Supper. So, it's quite specific. It's not a mystery. They're not to be added to. The traditions to which Paul is referring, he tells us in so many words in verse 15, to the words that had been written to you in letter form. Now, we were not there for the verbal teaching. But what we do have is the written word. And he says to hold to these things.

Now, I as a pastor, and others who have the charge and the calling to preach, we take the word of God and we are interpreting it. We seek to apply it. And in so doing, we recognize our own fundamental weakness. I am not God and I can be mistaken, and I make mistakes all the time. But you as a hearer, as a part of Christ's church, are called to test what you hear for if what I say is contrary to the word of God, then I am no longer holding to the word which has been written and I ought to be confronted with that. And I hope that that is what I seek to do along with pastor Mayfield and pastor Song. And the Presbytery, the denomination around us, making sure that we hold fast and true to the doctrines of the holy word. But we are called to hold fast to these traditions because they are grounded in this written word. So, what are we to know? The written word.

I want to return to this again as I did last Sunday night when we were gathered together for the first Lord's Supper service of the month. I encouraged them as I would encourage you, that if you don't have a regular place in your life, regular, more than once – it doesn't have to be every day – but a place where the word of God, you're taking it in. We have apps galore for the word of God. My chosen app is the ESV app. It's free! I can highlight, I can make notes, I can listen to a really good voice read the word back to me at various speeds. I use various means of taking in the word of God. I read it. Sometimes I just have it read to me. But I have a regular practice way outside what I do to prepare for Sunday morning to take in the word because I need it, because I am prone to wander from it and walk in my own wisdom.

Church of Jesus Christ, we have been blessed by the word of God. We have more copies of it, more ways to get to it than we could ever imagine or count. Paul is telling us to stand firm and hold fast to the written word. I encourage you, church, because you're beloved by God, because the work of salvation is the work of the Lord alone, and because He has done this in you, stand firm and hold fast to the word of God. Find a place where you're taking it in because if you are not, you and I will be like a wave on the ocean easily tossed to and fro. And what seems right to man will make more sense and wisdom than the word of God. Hold fast, stand firm on the word.

And after he's told them these things to be about these traditions which they have been taught, which definitely includes the word, the practicing of the sacraments, of baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and prayer, holding fast to these things and standing firm, he then reminds them that's all well and good. But without the enabling strength of the Lord, you and I can't do it.

So, he turns in these final two verses 16 and 17, he reminds them that the "Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word." There is instruction here. I was

reminded by one author that I think it's good for us to see what Paul is doing here. So, he began with a word of thanks and blessing. Now, he ends this little section with a prayer.

I know I'm guilty of this. Some of you would ask me, will you pray for me? And I was like, I will pray for you. But in preparation for this Sunday morning, I was reminded that sometimes I don't need to say that. I need to stop right there and pray because Paul doesn't say, I'll pray for you. He prays for them, and then he tells us the content of his prayer. We can practice that today. As you share your burdens with each other, you might feel it's a little weird if I say, can we pray? You know, we have a prayer room right there. We have places where you can go step outside. Some of you just need to receive someone's hand on your shoulder and to pray for you, whatever is going on in your life. We need to not just say the Christian evangelical thing: Yeah, I'll pray for you. Not that we don't mean it. But how many times have you said that, but then you forgot? I have. We can begin to put these things into practice. We can pray for one another.

But that's what he does. Listen to the prayer. This is unique to Paul. He has a plural subject but a singular verb. It's not just God's strength. It's not just the strength of Christ. He takes them both. He says, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace," now, right there, he's not just saying the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. He's not just saying, the love of the Lord God the Father be with you, as he did in 1 Thessalonians. Here, he's taking a plural subject "God the Father" and "Christ the Son" and gives them a shared verb, "they" are the ones together. As he's already said in the earlier parts of this section of the work of the Holy Spirit, he doesn't use the word "trinity," but if you've ever wondered whether the trinitarian doctrines are taught in Scripture, this is a great place to go. The Holy Spirit sanctifies, He strengthens us and enables us, but it is the love and grace of Christ and God the Father that does what? Gives us eternal comfort. Not momentary, not always tied to our circumstances, but eternal comfort. And gives us hope through grace.

Remember what we said a couple weeks ago? Grace is not just unmerited favor. It's grace to you and me even when we forget. It's grace to you and me even in the midst of our sin. It's grace to you and me even when we seek to walk in our own wisdom. It's eternal grace. Church, it's not about us. It's about what He's doing. And when we call on Him, we call on Him more than just for forgiveness. Lord God, Jesus Christ give me grace for today, I want to walk from you. I need your grace. Lord God give me grace today because all I see is brokenness. Give me grace. Lord, give me grace because all I see is despair. Lord, give me grace and hope because I want what I can't yet see, and I want to walk from you. It's not just unmerited favor, it's grace in the midst of our rebellion.

The Lord is good, and He is gracious. And he says, may the Lord God and Jesus Christ Himself give us eternal comfort, good hope through grace, and then he says to comfort your hearts. That's what I need, and I imagine you do, too, because I read your prayer requests. And some of you are going through difficulties you're not even sure you can share through a prayer request. I want you to know hope this morning because Jesus knows exactly what you're experiencing. The Holy Spirit is at work in you, and the Lord's love is not drained by our difficulties. And I would encourage you, find someone that can pray with you and remind you of this.

And then he says, "and establish them in every good work and word." Here's where we connect. This isn't just about spiritual stuff. It's not just about you, yourself, and Jesus. This is about the work you and I have to get up tomorrow morning and go and do. Some of you have to get up and leave your house and go to a place where they pay you a paycheck and do a job you may not enjoy doing. Others of you have to get up tomorrow morning and care for children that at times get on your nerves. Others of you have to get up tomorrow morning way early to go to school which is a place you're tired of going to. And I can't name all the possibilities in front of me, but you get where I'm going.

The good work God has for you is the work you're already doing. It's not about changing the World, capital "W," it's about simply getting up tomorrow morning and going to work. It's about getting

up tomorrow morning, and by God's Spirit being tamed by the Spirit, James 3, and beginning to speak words that build up and don't tear down.

This is a prayer that the Psalmist actually wrote in Psalm 90. And in Psalm 90, we hear these words as the Psalmist prays for the Lord's work. He says to them,

So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants and your glorious power to your children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and establish the work of our hands upon us. Yes, establish the work of our hands. [ESV]

Parents, engineers, students, children, young, retired, old, you're doing work. And may the Lord establish the work of your hands. But may He also anoint the tongues in our mouths that we may speak words that build up and not tear down. This is the call that Paul is giving to the church at Thessalonica and to us by extension.

On this Palm Sunday as Jesus entered into the city as the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings, He did so on a donkey in humility. No one knew what He was about to do. Yet, Jesus understood He was not coming to be exalted, He had come to be made low. He had come to serve as a sacrifice for our sins, to be exalted to a cross and then laid in a grave. But then on the third day, He rose again. And next Sunday, we will gather together, and we will celebrate the Lord's resurrection. But you remember the title of this series is Advent People? So, in some sense, we are waiting for the Lord to return. He has been raised from the dead, but He will come again for us.

What the Lord experienced as He came into Jerusalem, persecution, trial, difficulty, loneliness. That's what you and I experience now. But just as surely as the scriptures declare that Christ was raised from the dead, so, too, will Christ return again. Though we are in the midst of this week, this day of difficulty and trial, He calls us to hold fast and to stand firm, for the Lord of all eternity, the Lord of glory, calls you beloved by God drawn to Himself through His eternal power, equipped and loved by His grace to give you hope that your work may be established and blessed by Him.

May the Lord do this. May He work in us His will. And may, by His Spirit, may we hold fast. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you this morning for your word. We thank you for your comfort. We thank you for your grace. Now, I ask you, O Lord, on this Palm Sunday as we sing Hosanna, glory to the Lord in the highest, we ask you, O Lord, to give us your spirit and grace today to walk with you. Give us comfort. Bring healing where there needs to be healing, forgiveness and hope in the midst of brokenness. Lord, may you do this as we are works in your hands. We give you thanks that it is the Lord who holds us so that enabled by your strength, we may hold to that which you have taught us. We give you thanks and praise. In Jesus's name. Amen.