

STAND FIRM

by Ray C. Stedman

As a boy, growing up in the State of Montana, I loved to read stories of the Wild West. These tales convinced me that those days were perilous times. There were hostile Indian bands roaming around, seeking someone to torture and scalp; lawless gunmen waited in saloons, ready to shoot down anyone who caused them displeasure; and entire towns could be wiped out overnight by terrible plagues. The 19th century, it seemed to me, was a time when life seemed cheap and fraught with great danger.

But those times of peril apparently have come upon us again. Innocent tourists are kidnapped and held hostage for months, and even years. Seemingly safe office buildings are invaded by ruthless killers who leave a trail of death and destruction in their wake. Our public transportation system is coming under fire from stone-throwing mobs. A fearsome AIDS epidemic threatens to decimate our population. People bar themselves into their homes and live in fear and terror. Children murder their parents over trivial issues. A lusty, bawdy, godless lifestyle gains more followers as each day goes by.

Faced with these conditions, many are saying that faith in a God of love, power and justice is difficult to maintain. To many, compromise with the world, rather than challenge, seems preferable. Compromise has become the spirit of the age. Despair comes easily to our hearts.

At our staff meetings of late we have been discussing the many people who say that discouragement seeps into their souls daily.

That is the way it is today and that is the way it was for the Thessalonian Christians two thousand years ago. That is why the Apostle Paul wrote to them the two letters which we are covering in this present series. In the second letter Paul writes a wonderful passage of comfort and assurance, here in the second chapter, beginning with Verse 13:

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning 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, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.
{2 Th 2:13-15 RSV}

These words follow the apostle's description of the terrible conditions which will befall the world under the antichrist at the end of the age. The section begins with the word *but*, which we have already described as a corner word. *But* signals that the apostle is about to shift from the bad news to the good news. He is saying that no matter how bad things become in the world, Christians are expected to be different!

What makes that difference possible is stated here by the apostle in highly condensed form. This marvelous passage is packed with profound truth.

I do not think Paul was ever worried about whether or not he had an academic degree, although many people these days are preoccupied with gaining degrees. But if I had to confer a degree on the apostle I would endow him with the MTT degree, which stands for Master of Thumbnail Theology! He simply excels at stating truth in highly condensed forms, as we see here. In these verses are found seven aspects of truth which these Thessalonians needed to steady them in perilous times.

First, he says that the process of standing firm in the midst of a troubled world begins with the love of God for mankind. "... we are bound to give thanks to God always for you brethren, beloved by the Lord, ..." We seem to resist believing this truth despite the fact that the Bible lays much emphasis on God's love for us. We are so conscious of our own failure that, although we hide from others the mess we have made of our lives, we know we have not even measured up to our own hopes and dreams, let alone God's. Thus we have a hard time believing that God could love us. But Scripture everywhere begins on that basis.

Perhaps the most often quoted verse in the New Testament puts it best: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life," {cf, John 3:16 KJV}. How amazing to know that God loves us even though he knows everything about us! He knows our likes and dislikes, the wrong things we have done, the evil thoughts, the whole sorry mess -- yet he still loves us! I am reminded of the jingle that expresses this so well,

Isn't it odd,
that a Being like God,
Who sees the facade,
still loves the clod
He made out of sod;
now isn't that odd?

What a wondrous thing it is to know that God loves our broken and hurting race! Because God loves us, says Paul, "he chose us." He began to call us individually, drawing us to himself. No one knows why God chooses one and not another. That is a great mystery which exercises the minds of theologians and, indeed, just about everyone who reads the Bible. Scripture gives us no help in this.

Do not make the mistake of saying that God chooses those whom he foresaw would believe, that God looked down through the centuries and when he foresaw that we would believe the gospel he wrote our names in the Book of Life. But Scripture presents it otherwise. Even humans do not work that way. We choose to do something and then we foreknow what is going to happen because of the choice we have made. So does God. He chooses first and thus he foreknows that those he chose will come.

If you struggle with this do not feel bad because many others do. However, Jesus put it very plainly when he said, "No one can come to me except my Father draw him!" {cf, John 6:44}. More than any other verse in Scripture, perhaps, those words express the fact of God's call.

The purpose which God had in mind in calling us, says Paul, is that we might be saved. Salvation is his objective. That word gathers up a great deal of truth in Scripture. It includes conversion and regeneration, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and other changes that happen to us. But fundamentally, salvation means that our relationship to God has been altered. He no longer looks upon us as aliens and strangers, drifting along with a wicked and fallen world, but rather as children, dear ones, who have become his children through faith in his Son. That is the process of salvation. We have been selected out of the perishing world around us and destined for glory.

And the process, according to Paul, is "through sanctification by the Spirit." That is God's part. Theologians debate whether this should be translated with a capital S, the Spirit, referring to the Holy Spirit, or a small s, referring to the human spirit. But it does not make any difference for when you come to Christ your human spirit is invaded by the Holy Spirit. This is the act which the Bible calls *regeneration*, being born again, a new beginning. What a change that makes in a man or woman, boy or girl!

I recently read the story of a boy who loved to get into fights and scraps to show how tough he was. When he went to a church meeting at 16, however, the Spirit of God touched him and he came to Christ. Almost immediately he knew he was forever changed. He no longer wanted to fight, but to help people. That fundamental change in his disposition was a sign of his regeneration, by means of the invasion of the Holy Spirit.

The human side of that same process is "belief in the truth," says the apostle. I do not think it is possible to say which comes first, whether you believe in the truth before you are invaded by the Spirit, or you are invaded by the Spirit and then you believe the truth. But, somewhere along the line, a choice of the will must be made. You cannot come to Christ by merely sitting in church. You must believe that what God has said applies to you; that what He says he will do he is prepared to do. When you believe the truth, you are also invaded by the Spirit.

The step that brings us to that is to be "called through the gospel." This refers to the teaching and proclamation of the good news. Somewhere along the line we must hear what God offers to do. Perhaps it was in a conversation somewhere, or through reading the Bible, or hearing something said in church, in an evangelistic meeting, or on television. You heard what God promised to do for Christ's sake, and you

believed what you heard. Thus you were changed by the Spirit.

God's goal, according to Paul, is, "so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." What a fabulous promise! That we should some day share the triumph of the cross with Jesus himself! Yet that is the staggering promise of Scripture. No matter how obscure and unknown you may have been on earth, one day God will unveil before the whole universe what he has been doing through the centuries in bringing together a people who will share his glory. To the Colossians, Paul said, "When Christ who is our life shall appear, we shall appear with him also in glory," {cf, Col 3:4 KJV}. The writer of Hebrews says that God is "bringing many sons to glory," {Heb 2:10b RSV}. That is God's work throughout history and in our world today. Now you can see what I meant when I said that these verses constitute a marvelous survey of the whole sweep of Christian truth. Here, in a nutshell, the apostle presents deep theological truth in a marvelously compact way.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, had a gift for putting things in brief format. I want to share with you such a statement he would use on occasion.

We have a relationship that can never be changed:
we are children of the Most High.

We have a righteousness that can never be tarnished:
the very righteousness of Christ himself.

We have a resource that can never be diminished:
the power of the Spirit of God.

We have a peace that can ne'er be destroyed:
it is the God of Peace himself.

We have a joy that can never be surpassed:
the Scriptures call it "joy unspeakable and full of glory."

We have a love that will never let us go:
God's unconditional love.

We have an Intercessor whose prayers can never go unanswered:
the Spirit of Christ within us.

We have a Sovereign Lord who can never lose control:
the King of kings himself.

If all that is true, then it is no wonder that the apostle goes on to say to the Thessalonians, "So then, brethren, ..." "As a result of all this, brethren," Paul is saying, "stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter." Two activities, says Paul, are possible despite the hard times they were going through. They could "stand fast," and they could "hold fast." Stand fast; "Do not give in under pressure," and Hold fast; "do not give up the truth."

More than anything else, our generation of Christians needs to hear these words again. "Stand fast." Paul is saying that we already have what it takes to do so. What we need to do is to draw upon the resources he has made available; to choose to live accordingly. Take God at his word! There is no reason to quit, or to give in to evil. When I hear Christians say "I couldn't help myself," I know they are deceiving themselves, that it is just not in accordance with reality. Christians can help themselves; that is why God gives them the Holy Spirit.

After the first service this morning I got a note concerning a man who used to be a pastor in this area. He told a friend that he had to quit the pastorate because "the pressure became too great." Again, that is self-deception. The promise of Scripture is: "God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able to bear, but with the temptation will make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13}. Thousands can testify that these words are true. God has given us what it takes to handle the pressures. What we need to do is to review our resources.

I once heard the story of an old Navajo Indian in Arizona on whose land oil was discovered. He became a very wealthy man as a result, but wealth did not change him. He went on living just as he was before. The money piled up in the bank, but every now and then the old man would visit the bank and say to the banker, "Crops all dried up; sheep all dead; cattle all stolen." The banker knew exactly what to do. He would take the old man into the vault, sit him at a table and place several bags of silver dollars in front of him for him to count. After a while the man would come out and say, "Crops fine; sheep all alive; cattle all back." Why the change? He had simply reviewed his resources and reminded himself of what he had to fall back on.

That is what believers must do when the pressure comes. When we feel like complaining and murmuring let us remember who God has made us to be, and what he has promised us for times of stress.

A young pastor called me in despair last week. A crisis had erupted in his church and it looked like everything was falling apart. His ministry of preaching the truth in great power had come under the attack of the enemy, and he was ready to quit in despair. I steadied him by taking him back, step by step, over what God had made him to be, what his resources were, and Whom he could count on. I reminded him of the Israelites at the edge of the Red Sea. God did not say to them, "Go out into the water and drown." No, he told them, "I will see you through to the other side." That is what God is saying to us too: Stand fast!

Second, hold fast! "Hold fast the traditions you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter." Paul is speaking of apostolic truth. Our New Testament comes to us from the hands of apostles who heard the Lord Jesus, having been taught directly by him while he was still on earth, or afterwards through appearances or visions. "Traditions," is what Paul calls these teachings, but they are not the traditions of men. This is no *Fiddler on the Roof* playing over endlessly the customs of the past! These are revelations of reality from the mind of God, who sees things absolutely the way they are. These are truths that were verbally imparted to people of the 1st century by the apostles, and which have come down to us by means of letters from their hands.

In First Corinthians 11, the apostle commends the Corinthians for what he calls maintaining "the traditions" which he had delivered to them {cf, 1 Cor 11:2 RSV}. One of those was the Lord's Table, God's visual aid, to help us grasp the mystery and marvel of the death and resurrection of our Lord; what it cost him, that we might be saved and changed; and what it means to us now in terms of new life and resurrection power. As we gather at the Lord's Table we are maintaining "the traditions."

When we read and study the Word, we are also maintaining the apostolic traditions delivered to men and women. It is impossible to stand fast unless we also hold fast the traditions. A church that begins to forsake apostolic truth soon falls into error and weakness. Once again we are confronted with the news that another nationally known television evangelist has messed up his life through sexual misconduct. The world will leap on this, as it did with other such revelations, and claim that Christians are no different than anyone else. But God expects his people to stand fast because they hold fast the traditions of the truth. Weakness quickly follows when any individual or church forsakes the apostolic teaching.

The churches of our land today are filled with biblical illiterates. Not only do Christians think that an epistle is the wife of an apostle, and that Sodom and Gomorrah were lovers, but, even worse, they do not understand the doctrine of justification by faith, or the difference between the spirit and the flesh, or what the New Covenant means. Because they do not know these things, they are living continually under the domain of the evil one and doing his will even though they are believers in Christ. Nothing takes the place of the Scriptures. To the Pharisees, Jesus said, "Search the Scriptures for in them you think you will find eternal life, but they are what gives testimony to me!" {cf, John 5:39}. Do not look into the Scriptures to find rules for how to live, but look into them to find Christ, the Refuge and Resource of the believer at all times.

In the brief prayer which follows, the apostle applies all of this to the Thessalonians:

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loves us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. {2 Th 2:16-17 RSV}

Here Paul is underlining what he has been saying all along -- that the great resource of the believer is God himself! When you are in trouble, expect God, who is your defense, to supply strength so that you may hold steady. Watch him as he works to unfold a solution to your difficulty. The Thessalonians had already experienced this supply when they first came to Christ: He "who loves us," says Paul, "and gave us eternal comfort" (a sense of acceptance before him), also, "gave us good hope" (the promise of a different destiny). All of that is already ours "through grace," God's free gift to us. Paul fully expects that to continue: God will "comfort your hearts" (reassure you), and "establish you in every good work and word," (steady and strengthen you when you are in trouble). You can count on that! He will give you the strength to do what you need to do, if you choose to do it.

What all this means, when it is applied to daily living, is that believers already have power to do what they ought to do. You can put an end to your bad habits:

- If you are playing around with cocaine, crack, or marijuana, you can stop it. You are not bound or limited by that except as you choose to be; the power of God is equal to it if you decide to stop.
- If you are a victim of alcohol, or smoking, you can, by the power of Christ, stop indulging in that. Struggle against these things will not be eliminated, but you will have the strength to keep on fighting day by day until the battle is won.
- If your hot temper is causing problems, you can change.
- If your problem is a critical spirit, you can become a changed person.

You have the power to do it! God will establish, strengthen, and support you to enable you to do so.

The opening word of Chapter 3, is one that everyone likes to hear in church!

Finally! I have, at times, been introduced as, "A man who needs no introduction, but who could sure stand a conclusion!" Here the apostle extends what he has been saying to where he is now living and working, the city of Corinth, and asks the Thessalonians to pray for him.

Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph, as it did among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men; for not all have faith. {2 Th 3:1-2 RSV}

Writing from the wicked city of Corinth (the San Francisco of the ancient world), Paul is asking that the same thing happen there as had occurred in Thessalonica. God had wonderfully blessed the apostle's work there. In but three short weeks of preaching in the synagogue, God had established a church, calling people out of the darkness and ritual in which they had been bound, to partake in a living, vibrant church. That is the power of the Word of God! Just as that word spread rapidly among them, revealing its glory and its ability to change people, Paul now asks for prayer that the darkness of Corinth be similarly penetrated by the gospel.

Many preachers today seem to have lost sight of the naked power of the Word of God. At a pastors' meeting last week, one of the men told me the story of a college professor whom he had met in Germany, a Dr. Kern. This man is a member of the Lutheran Church, the State church of that country. He had little interest in the local church, which he attended only a couple of times a year. He had never read the Bible, and had no knowledge of the things of Christ. But, because he was a prominent citizen, the church asked him to serve on the board. He agreed, and sought to do the best job he could. His efforts resulted in his being asked to serve at the State level, and ultimately on the governing council of the church for the entire nation.

When he reached that level he became convinced that he ought to know something, at least, of the Christian faith, so he took two weeks vacation and went alone to a quiet retreat where he began to read the Bible. He

became so fascinated that he just read on and on, sometimes even missing meals, until at the end of the first week, he knelt down in his room, and cried out to the Lord to save him. The next week he deliberately missed his meals, fasting through the week, and continuing to read till he had covered the entire Bible. He returned to his position of leadership a changed man. He became an influence for change in the government of the church, and is now a powerful voice calling people back to reintroducing God and the Scriptures into the dead machinery of the church.

That is what the Word of God can do. What a tragedy it is when preachers fail to "hold fast" to the traditions of the apostles!

The second thing for which Paul asks is prayer for protection: "that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men; for not all have faith." That last phrase suggests that the opposition he faced was coming from within the church itself. There were people in the church who claimed to be believers but they had no real faith and were making things difficult for Paul. It is interesting to note that he does not ask for the elimination of this opposition, but only that he might be delivered through it. God does not often take our trials away. If you ask him to do so he probably will not do so because he knows your need for trial. What he does promise is that he will take you through it. You do not need to fail or give in to wrongful activity because he has already given you what it takes.

This reminds the apostle of a similar need in Thessalonica. Thus he closes this section with a word to them again.

But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things which we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. {2 Th 3:3-5 RSV}

God is faithful! You do not have to worry about him. He will never fail you but will always deliver you, if you trust him. Also the apostle knew the Thessalonians well enough to know that they would make the choices that would release the power of God, by their obedience. Thus, they could have everything they needed, which consists of two things: The love of God and the patience of Christ!

That is also what we need today. Are you keeping yourself in the love of God? That is what will give you a sense of security and worth, a sense of being wanted and needed. It makes no difference what people think about you. "If God be for you, who can be against you?" {cf, Rom 8:31}. Remind yourself of the love of God throughout the day. Think through what the apostle has written in this section. Keep yourself in the love of God!

He will also give you the patience of Christ, the willingness to wait and watch him work things out. The Lord never became upset and angry at the resistance he encountered. He did not despair through all the terrible trials he had to endure but committed himself to "him who is able" and he waited for him to work {cf, Rom 16:25, Eph 3:20}.

That is surely what we need to do today.

The love of God gives us security, and the patience of Christ give us consistency, the quality that this age needs more than anything else. Christians should be the same day in and day out. They should refuse to become upset and thrown off by circumstances so that they end up responding like the world around. Stand fast! And hold fast! God will see you through to the day when you will share the glory of Christ.

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