

Session 3

THE CHURCH: STRENGTHENED FOR EVERY GOOD WORK

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Memory Verse

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope,¹⁷ comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say.

– 2 THESSALONIANS 3:16-17, CSB

The Church: Strengthened for Every Good Work

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Salvation through Christ puts a person in a position to walk in obedience to God and also gives him or her the desire and motivation to do it. However, the sanctification of the soul, while requiring the effort of the Christian, is just as much a work of God as justification.

? Have you ever been in a situation where you had to miss one or more meals?

? How did this affect you? How have we been created to seek nourishment when it is missing?

Missing a meal isn't that big of a deal for most people. You may even forget to eat a meal from time to time. But it's unlikely you would forget two. If you were forced to miss three meals, then your way of looking at the world would probably start to change. You would be singularly focused on finding nourishment for your body. After all, you know and your body reminds you that if you don't eat something soon your body will begin to shut down.

Going without food for a day is bearable if you know that plenty of food awaits. It still may be difficult, but the knowledge of coming relief will help you to maintain your composure. Now imagine that you've missed three meals and you have no guarantee of food again. Or, imagine the difference between holding your breath underwater knowing that all you have to do is lift your head to breathe, and holding your breath underwater because your foot is jammed between two rocks. The circumstance is the same (holding your breath underwater), but what is going on inside your mind and heart is completely different.

Christians live in a fallen world. They suffer disease, persecution, and physical death. They battle against their own flesh, the world's influence, and the devices of Satan. Life in this world is disappointing, to say the least. But Christians look forward to an eternal reward in an eternal home that will be infinitely better than this sin-tarnished existence. The reality of a future rest in heaven changes the way they live here and now. Jeremiah Burroughs said, "One drop of the sweetness of heaven is enough to take away all the sourness and bitterness of all the afflictions in the world."¹

Session Summary

The five verses that we are considering today are found in a letter written by Paul to the church in Thessalonica. This is the second of two letters to the Thessalonians that we have a record of, and both are included in the canon of Scripture. It seems that there were questions in the church of Thessalonica concerning the second coming of Christ. Thus, both letters contain some of Paul's teaching about the second coming of Christ. In the passage just prior to the text we are studying today, Paul described the "man of lawlessness" as well as those who would be deceived by him and would follow him.

Then, Paul pivoted to his dear brothers and sisters who were in Thessalonica. He began, "But we ought to thank God always for you" and then went on to reaffirm the Lord's miraculous saving work in their lives, their duty as followers of Christ, and his desire for the Lord's continued blessing and power in their lives.

1. Loved, Chosen, and Called by God (2 Thess. 2:13-14)

Paul drew a sharp contrast between those who would follow the “man of lawlessness” and the true believers in the church at Thessalonica. We can almost hear the joy and tenderness in his voice as he turned his thoughts from the work of Satan to the fruit of the work of Jesus the Christ, namely the saved souls to whom he was writing. Paul loved them and his love was based on their shared identity. They, like Paul, were once shipwrecked souls, but were rescued by Christ and welcomed into the family of the one true and living God.



What words did Paul use to describe the Christians in Thessalonica? How are these words true of all Christians?

Paul said that they were “loved by the Lord.” Paul was grateful because of the love that God had shown the Christians at Thessalonica. God’s love toward His people in Christ Jesus is the foundation for the gospel and the foundation for the hope and joy of all those who have been redeemed. Paul wrote elsewhere, “God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The love that was proven in Christ is lasting. It doesn’t wear out and it cannot be displaced. Again, Paul explained, “I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).


God’s love came first. Christians often talk about the idea of love in terms of love toward God from His children. This is good and appropriate, but they must also remember that they love God because God first loved them (1 John 4:19). This accords with the second descriptor that Paul used, “chosen.” Paul said that God had chosen them “from the beginning” for salvation. God chose them because he loved them, not because of anything they could offer Him. His love preceded their very birth!

 For what purpose did God choose those in Thessalonica, and what was the means by which they were saved?

Paul was thankful because, in His love, God chose the Thessalonians for salvation. The love of God is bound up in the action of Christ Jesus the righteous nailed upon the cross. His suffering and death were undertaken so that poor sinners might find mercy and grace. God is both just—because He punishes sin—and the justifier—because He counts those who repent and believe on Christ as forgiven (Rom. 3:26).

Paul also explained the means by which God saved them. He mentioned three avenues by which they were made right with God. First, he said they were saved “through sanctification by the Spirit.” This means that their being set apart as holy and righteous was a work of the Spirit of God. They weren’t made holy and righteous by their own efforts or power. That work, of course, is mysterious. The working of the Spirit of God in the heart of a sinner is beyond our comprehension. But the ordinary means that accompanies it is clear to us. Paul said they were saved “through belief in the truth.” The secret work of the soul was by the Spirit, but the outward means was faith in the truth. What truth was Paul referring to? He made it clear in the next verse: “called through our gospel.”

Christians would do well to keep these truths ever before them. Christians need the gospel preached to their souls regularly. As their hearts are kept warm by the gospel fire, they are enabled to root out the dread of their consciences, the condemnation of their hearts, and the deceptions of the world and of the devil. This is why it is a fundamental duty of all those who are in Christ to regularly gather up in their souls the grand certainties of their salvation, look upon them, and find rest therein once again.

 **Application:** Are you loved by God? How do you know? How might reminding yourself of those truths change the way you live your life?

2. Stand Firm (2 Thess. 2:15)

The saving work of God in the life of a sin-dead soul always, without exception, leads to good works. The essence of a Christian's new birth is the saving work of God. The fruit of a Christian's new birth is concrete, regular, and increasing obedience to God's Word. Christians are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).



What good work did Paul exhort the Thessalonians to?

In verse 15, we find two commands that refer to essentially one charge. Paul told them to "stand firm" and "hold to." The key to understanding exactly what he meant is found in the rest of the sentence. Paul said that they should "stand firm and hold to the traditions [they] were taught, whether by what [Paul] said or what [Paul] wrote."

Here's an important point to take up and remember. Paul's exhortation wasn't only to "stand firm" or to "hold fast." Those simple commands are accepted and applauded in our culture today. Even unbelievers would be happy and inspired by the encouragement to do those things as long as they were able to fill in the blank after them. But Paul didn't leave it up to the Thessalonians (or Christians today) to decide upon what they should stand firm or to what they should hold fast.




What did Paul say they should stand firm upon? What does that mean for Christians today?

Paul instructed the Christians in Thessalonica to stand firm upon and hold fast to the teachings they had received from Paul, whether in person or via letter. They may have received other teachings from other apostles as well, we can't be sure. But the point is that Paul knew what teaching they had received, he knew it was sound, and he knew that it was for their spiritual good to hold fast to it. He also realized that the greatest threat to their joy, hope, and growth in Christ was the insidious strategies of Satan to lead them astray into false teaching.


What does this mean for Christians today? Paul is no longer visiting churches or sending letters to instruct them, so how should churches understand this verse? Let's start by dispelling a false interpretation. The principle here is not that people and churches should find their truth and stand firm upon it. Rather, individuals and churches should find the truth and stand firm upon it. Truth is absolute, and the suggestion that each church can and should have their own truth is patently false and egregiously unscriptural.

The fact of the matter is that Christians do have Paul's (and the apostles') teaching today. Not only that but they have the four testimonies of Christ and the Acts of the early church, as well as the Law and the Prophets. Christians are not given the freedom to stand firm upon whatever seems right in their own eyes. Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to stand firm upon a specific set of beliefs. Churches today, likewise, must stand firm and hold fast to the clear teaching of Scripture and reject the philosophies and beliefs of the world if they contradict the testimony of the Bible.

 **Application: When has standing firm upon and holding fast to the Scriptures put you at odds with the world?**

3. Encouragement and Strength (2 Thess. 2:16-17)

Paul concluded this section of the letter with a benediction. He expressed a prayer in relation to the command that he gave to them. After telling the church to stand firm upon sound doctrine, he prayed that the Lord would provide them with the grace needed to do so.

 **What did Paul pray that God would give the Thessalonians? Why was this needed?**

Before he considered what they would need in the future, Paul rehearsed what God had already done for them. He reminded them that God “has loved [them] and given [them] eternal encouragement and good hope by grace” (v. 16). This is important because God had already proven Himself to be a faithful provider. The Thessalonians have no reason to doubt God’s ability, goodness, and wisdom, and neither do Christians today.

God’s track record is perfect and provides assurance of His future performance on behalf of His children (not that God owes anyone anything). So, when Paul prayed that God would “encourage [their] hearts and strengthen [them] in every good work and word” they had every reason to believe that Paul’s prayer would be answered by God.

? Why did Paul pray for God’s intervention in this area? What is God’s role in our good works compared with our role?

The belief that God does His part by saving people and then people have to do their part by serving God is one of the cruelest deceptions of Satan. The Christian who believes this is like the child of a king who repeatedly leaves the palace to go and labor among the servants hoping that one day the king will accept him and love him.


Christians are helpless to save themselves and they remain helpless to serve God after they are saved in their own power. God not only provides for salvation, but He also provides for sanctification. The life of the Christian is one that clings to Christ from new birth into eternity. Yes, Christians have been saved for good works, but they can’t do those good works apart from Christ. Apart from Christ, they can do nothing (John 15:5). Christians need the encouragement, help, strength, and Spirit of God in order to walk in obedience to God.

? Where do you need God’s encouragement and strength in good works this week?

Conclusion

Paul desired that the Christians in Thessalonica would remember the miraculous work of salvation, and that they would hold fast to the truth of the gospel that they had believed. He also prayed that they would be strengthened to do those good works to which they were called.

 Are you a Christian? What made you one? How do you know that you are a Christian?

 Why is it important for Christians and churches to stand firm upon the teachings of Scripture? What are some ways that churches can veer off the path of holding fast to the Scriptures?

 Why do Christians need Christ just as much in sanctification as they do in salvation?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Jesus Christ the Savior perfectly fulfilled the work of God by obeying the Law flawlessly and then dying on the cross willingly. Furthermore, Jesus ever lives at the right hand of the Father to make intercession for all those who have come to Him.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Churches who feast upon the Scriptures and are strengthened and encouraged to be obedient to them by the sweetness and power of the gospel will be witnesses about Jesus Christ, serve their neighbors selflessly, and cross-cultural barriers with the gospel message.



FOR NEXT WEEK

The Unexpected Day

Main Passages

- Luke 21:25-38

Session Outline

1. There Will Be Signs (Luke 21:25-27)
2. Your Redemption Is Near (Luke 21:28-33)
3. Be Alert (Luke 21:34-38)

Memorize

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope,¹⁷ comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say.

- 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - 1 John 4:7-21
- Tuesday - John 13:34-35
- Wednesday - 1 Peter 4:8
- Thursday - Romans 15:7
- Friday - John 15:13
- Saturday - Romans 5:8

References

¹⁷Burroughs, Jeremiah. *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. Scotland, United Kingdom: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964.