

August 2, 2026 - 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 - "Stand Firm and Hold On"

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[0:00] Our reading today comes from 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. 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.

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.

This is God's word. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Duffy. It's great to be gathered another Sunday. And it's been a little fun morning singing with you guys and clapping and everything. Who said you can't clap in church? Amen. Amen. Amen.

[1:46] Amen. As we continue our series in 2 Thessalonians, we've kind of been taking this in smaller chunks.

And so I felt compelled to, by the structure of the text, to stop in verse 17 before we get into the next portion, because there is quite a lot that we can unpack here today.

And thinking of, like, we're in the middle, like the end of chapter 2. Did you know that there's a chapter before that? And there's verses before this one.

Isn't that interesting? And considering what came before, I'd imagine hearing everything that Paul had just previously said in this chapter for the first time.

Like, imagine hearing this. Like, there's going to be a rebellion of a lot of people walking away from their faith.

[2:47] There's going to be a man of lawlessness who will come with satanic power. There will be people deceived because they refuse to love the truth.

And God will either give them over to their delusion or they will face judgment. I mean, after hearing all that, sounds like a good movie.

I think I would have one question for Paul after hearing all of that. Paul, how in the world am I supposed to make it?

If all of that is true, if there's going to be a rebellion, there's going to be a very powerful individual rising up by the power of Satan.

And there's going to be a lot of people deceived. It makes me ask Paul, how in the world am I supposed to make it? If deception is that deceiving, if Satan is that cunning, if the human heart can be that easily led astray, what keeps a Christian from being swept away with everyone else?

[4:11] That is where Paul turns to in verse 13 and says essentially, but for you, church in Thessalonica, that's not your story. It's not your story.

And what follows is one of the richest paragraphs in, I believe, this entire letter. And today, Paul shows us that the Christian life does not rest upon our ability to hold everything together like control freaks.

But it's God who has been at work since the beginning. In these verses, Paul gives us three progressive realities.

That God saves us. That God gives us truth to hold. And God supplies the grace by which we live it. All of it. God saves us, gives us truth to hold, and supplies the grace in which we live it. And today, we must ask Paul how we can stand when everything around us seems to completely knock us

over.

[5:22] We need to ask Paul that today. And so for that, I have three answers. Three answers to that question. The sermon title today is Stand Firm and Hold On.

Stand Firm and Hold On. And I believe by the end of answering these three, giving these three answers, as we break this passage up into those three sections, I believe at the end of it, the main point that we will take away is that we hold fast because God first took hold of us.

We hold fast because God first took hold of us. Let's pray as we dive into these answers and inquire upon the Lord to allow His Spirit to have its way in our hearts this morning.

Let's pray. Father, we come to you as beggars searching for the bread of life, your word that nourishes our soul, that at times encourages us or at other times deeply convicts us.

Father, have your word find us. Speak to this church body through my frail words this morning and have your way. And we praise in Jesus' name. Amen.

[6:53] Amen. The first answer that we have for as we inquire of Paul, how in the world am I supposed to make it?

Well, first answer we see in verse 13 through 14. Look at what God has done. How in the world am I supposed to make it?

Well, look at what God has done. In verse 13, Paul begins with one of the most important words of the paragraph. He begins with a word, a conjunction word, a word of contrast, but.

And he had just described those who have refused to love the truth, that believe in a lie, and who fall under judgment. That was last week in the verses.

The rebellion, the Antichrist, all of that. He says, but. He turns to the Thessalonians. He says, but we ought always to give thanks to God for you, beloved by the Lord.

[7:58] In other words, he's saying, he's making a contrast between the people in rebellion, those who are in trouble, with the Thessalonians.

He's making a clear break. He's saying, I am not speaking to you as though you're one of them who will be falling away. He says, but.

To do this, Paul returns to this thanksgiving section with which almost the letter began. It almost feels like another introduction. But what's happening in written style form is an inclusio.

Same sort of pattern at the beginning as the end. And it's sort of ending his thought here. He's getting ready to wrap up the passage. And what we see here is that they are distinct from those who are perishing.

But not because they are wiser. Not because they're stronger. Not because they have the best Bible translation out there known to man. Not because they're subscribed to all these cool podcasts that are solid in doctrine and everything like that.

[9:08] No, Paul thanks God because their salvation is a result of God's intervention in their lives. And in these few two verses, Paul gathers together nearly an entire seminary curriculum.

An entire semester full of content on the doctrine of salvation. An entire seminary semester. He goes from love, you see election, you see sanctification, you see faith, you see calling, you see glory.

I didn't take Carmen's advice. He said, why don't you just preach that? And I probably could have. Because there's a lot there that we can unpack. But I think what we really need to see is what Paul is doing with his language.

Because in these two verses, he's having them remember something in the past. He's saying, look back, look at the present, and look at the future.

Look back presently and future within these verses. Let's look back. He says, God loved and chose you. God chose you as the first fruits to be saved.

[10:23] Through sanctification, a fancy Christianese word for meaning set apart, sanctification. Through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

This is really interesting here. Because you've probably heard of the word Trinity passed around here and there. But you see here that there's some working between God and Spirit and the Son. And we should rightly see that salvation is very Trinitarian. Very Trinitarian. The Father chooses and calls.

The Son loves His people and shares His glory with them. And the Spirit sets them apart in life. Your salvation bears fingerprints of the Trinity.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit from beginning to end. The whole head is committed to the salvation of God's people.

[11:31] Did you notice what Paul said though? He said God chose them as first fruits to be saved. Now, culturally speaking, first fruits, we don't, unless you're a gardener, I heard there's some crazy, crazy Taco Bell lettuce going around.

Causing some issues. But just, lesson learned, don't go to Taco Bell. You wouldn't have to worry. But first fruits were the beginning of a harvest.

And the promise that more would come. It's picking the first fruits from your back garden. Knowing that you just cleared out all the fruit.

And then you're trusting that more will come. So these Thessalonian believers, they were among the first gathered in Thessalonica through the gospel.

Or maybe it was a small beginning pointing to a larger harvest to come. I mean, look at that. It reached Youngstown, Ohio in 2026 at Steel Valley.

[12:37] Certainly, these were first fruits. Now, why would Paul though mention something like God choosing? Which you might know as election.

It's the E word. Sometimes it triggers people. But I'm not intending to do that this morning. It's in the text and you have to deal with it. And why would he choose something like election to this church who is surrounded in confusion?

Who is suffering from persecution? Well, he certainly doesn't introduce it to have them go into endless debates of God's sovereignty and distract Christians from the mission fields.

That's often what happens with this discussion in our day today. It's a good conversation, but man, it can become an idol. But it is often as we look through Scripture, and if you point out many different places in Scripture where election is mentioned, there's often something going on around the emphasis of election.

It's often within the context of persecution, confusion, temptation, and death that Paul mentions election of God choosing.

[13:56] The emphasis is certain here too. Paul is giving this church solid ground upon which they can stand and continue to endure.

You see, our election is the sure comfort for those of us in Jesus Christ amid turmoil. When you don't feel like anything's going right, what a great theological foundation to say, God chose me. God saved me. God saved me.

opens your eyes to the truth of God's word and God's reality and Christ's love. And the light is flipped on. If you're a scholar here, you might call that regeneration. When the Spirit opened their hearts, set them apart, and they brought them to believe the truth that they once rejected, changed forever. Not chasing the world, but chasing Christ. Paul says to look backward God loved you and chose you. He goes to the present though. Look at what God is doing now.

He mentions the work of the Spirit, truth, and the gospel. There's a false understanding that believing in election breeds sort of this passivity. Passivity, coldness, maybe some indifference towards evangelism. Some people might call that fatalism. Like, you know, those reformed guys, they're so dry. They don't evangelize. They don't care. There's a God's sovereign. He's going to save whoever he wishes. Yeah, that's true. But that is called fatalism. There is an engagement that a lot of the reformed community don't engage in, but there are a lot that do as well.

[16:26] Look what Paul says here. He makes it clear that you can't just bask in your election. He actually says that it took this proclamation for the Thessalonians. He wants the Thessalonians to remember the proclamation that they received. This means that we in our church don't need to peer into eternity to see which family members are worthy of sharing the gospel with, right? But Paul says, God called you through the gospel. Yeah, God chose you, but He called you through the gospel. In other words, God's eternal purpose reached them through ordinary Christian proclamation.

Often through conversations, not always from a pulpit in church, but through conversations at grocery store, at your workplace, at family gatherings, and things of that nature. Someone preached, they heard, they believed. And furthermore, think about it. Had no one preached, had they all been fatalistic, just sat on their biscuit, right? Just sitting around, just saying, go and sobering.

If no one would have preached, no one would have heard, and no one would have believed. Okay? If you're not in Christ today, friend, if you're here today wondering, like, you don't...

And you're getting caught up on this, like, chosenness. Like, well, am I chosen? Am I not? I would encourage you to understand that the God who put the gospel in front of the Thessalonian church is the same God who is putting it before you today.

Right now, for you to have a hope that goes beyond all the riches of this earth and comes to salvation of your soul to save you from the inevitable rebellion that we have since birth. And as we chase the riches and the pleasures of the world and say, nothing in this world compares to the salvation and the hope that I have in Jesus Christ. Jesus died for you. He rose from the grave.

[19:14] He did His part. So believe. Turn from your sin and believe in this truth today. Don't walk away just saying, eh, this is a pretty good sermon, good coffee, gluten-free bread. Eh. But take this moment to really think about the future implications of what ongoing rejection is going to have for you someday.

And you will understand at that point that the most loving thing that I'm doing for you today is calling you to know that truth, to believe it. Because if it is true, there is great hope of salvation, a great glory awaiting.

The sovereign God accomplishes His saving purpose through the active witness of His people. He's working now. It's not my opinion, not my ideas, but this is the Apostle Paul calling you to believe.

Let's look forward. He looks forward here. God is bringing you to glory. You might say, what's the definition or destination, not definition, of the saving work. He says, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, God called them to resurrection life, to be transformed into Christ-likeness. That's the setting-apartness of life, the sanctification amid salvation as an expression of salvation. Not a means to it, but God comes to us and chooses us when we're all filthy and messy and in rebellion. You know, before we knew Christ, Christ died for us and saved us. And so He's making us into His likeness to share in the splendor of His kingdom. And so this is not just to survive persecution, though.

[21:13] This isn't just to escape the exceptions. Stand back for a minute, because the contrast can't be any clearer. I'm going to try my best to really reinforce this. Those who love the lie, what happened last week? The ones who love the lie, they move toward condemnation, right? But those whom God calls through the gospel move towards glory. Do you see what Paul is doing here? Let me ask you a question.

When you fear that you won't make it, where do you look first? To your strength? Of your faith? Or to the faithfulness of God? Church, your story doesn't have to, does not begin with your strength as we see God chose.

It doesn't begin with your strength, and guess what? It's not because of any strength of your decision. It continues because of the strength of God in your life. Your story doesn't begin with your strength of a decision. It will not end in the strength of your determination. It begins in the love of God.

It's carried forward by the sanctifying Spirit. It comes to you through the gospel, and it ends in the glory of Jesus Christ. Man. Now, if we stopped at verse 14, I think you can adequately preach this in a sermon, but if we stopped at verse 14, without considering the verses that come, you might stop and say, I have a terrifying conclusion that if God loved me, if God chose me, if God called me, God sanctifies me and will bring me into glory, well, this sounds like a great time to have a nap.

Right? The work is done. Let's just chill. No worries. Right? That'd be a terrifying conclusion. But he continues. And I want us to see here another answer to our question. How in the world am I supposed to make it? Well, the answer here in verse 15 is, hold what God has said.

[23:52] It says, so then. A little word here to kind of point us backward, but also connect as a conjunction. Because God loved you. Because God chose you. Because God called you through the gospel. Because you have been appointed for glory. Paul says, so then. Stand firm and hold.

In other words, God's sovereign grace holds his people in the first answer that we had. Yeah, his sovereign grace holds his people. But then there's a command that his people are to hold tightly to his truth. Don't you love that? Don't you love where God's sovereignty and human responsibility meet? And you find them working hand in hand as friends? Man, it's beautiful.

The two commands Paul uses here are to stand firm and to hold too. Stand firm or maybe remain settled or unmoved. To hold describes a firm grip and determined commitment.

Isn't it interesting how hardship has a way of making it so difficult to cling to God's promises? And Paul says to hold on. But hold on to what? Hold on to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. Now, there has been nothing more dividing than traditions in the church, right? Especially when it comes to Catholic traditions, Orthodox traditions, Protestant traditions, whatever that modge podge turns out to be. But Paul is not making every inherited tradition sacred.

That's not what he's doing. That's what the world likes to use this for and cherry pick this. These traditions that Paul is referring to are authoritative teachings delivered by Christ's own appointed apostles. The doctrine, the gospel, the commands, the instructions that they had received both orally and written. That is our authority, church. But what's your authority? What's your functional authority in your life? When Scripture and your instincts sort of disagree, which one moves? [26:51] When Scripture confronts something you deeply want to be true, who gets the final word?

You see, the church doesn't determine true north. God has already fixed the true north. The compass ain't broke. The world's broke. So our responsibility is to keep the compass pointed there towards true north. And praise the Lord that we no longer have to wait for an apostolic visit. We don't have to wait for Paul's successor to come or a new inspired letter they had in a dream at three o'clock in the morning, right? God has preserved the apostles' teaching for his church in Scripture.

He sovereignly preserved it. That's why we should be deeply, deeply cautious whenever anyone claims this fresh apostolic authority. The church is not waiting for another apostle to give us a new revelation, whether his name is Joseph Smith, Muhammad, or some self-titled apostle in our area. It's very popular.

[28:20] Christ has given the church his apostolic word. He has passed it down. He has given it. So hold on to it. We don't need a new truth. We need the courage to hold a truth that we've received. We have to have the courage to fight against our own flesh of becoming bored and accustomed to the old, repeated, God and Jesus died for my sin. He rose from the grave. That should not get old.

One of the primary means by which God preserves his people is by anchoring them in a truth that he's given. Remember, Jesus was very emphatic about that in John 15, to abide in his word. He said many times, to keep my words, keep my commandments. Psalm 119, to delight in the law of his word constantly.

But perhaps maybe you're thinking, well, Paul, you just told me to stand firm, firm. But what if I don't feel firm? Paul, what if I don't feel firm?

We have the third answer, and that's the basis of this. As we're talking to Paul, how in the world am I supposed to make it? I don't feel chosen. I don't feel like I'm holding on to anything, but just clinging to this little tight string from falling into the abyss. How in the world am I supposed to make it? Well, third answer, depend on what God supplies. After commanding these Thessalonians to stand firm, Paul immediately prays that God would enable them to do it.

He ends this section in a benediction. I hope Carmen's going to end our time with that today. It 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, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. Paul now points them to the source of their spiritual strength, regardless of what their feelings decide to say about the matter. The God who calls his people also supplies his people to remain faithful. He describes the Father as the one who loved us, gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace. This love reaches back to what he just got through in verse 13, that God chose them.

[31:15] In other words, God loved his people, chose them for salvation, called them through the gospel, and gave them hope that extends beyond any temporary trouble. And church, when our experiences in our lives offer very little comforts, we must remember that Christian comfort is not merely the expectation that life will soon become easier. You signed up to be a Christian to have an easier life because Apostle Bob said that, you know, come to Christ and everything's going to work out. You're going to have riches.

You're going to be blessed. You'll be healed. You'll be forgiven. Right? It's even in the Bible, by his stripes, you are healed. Right? No, Apostle Bob. It's not true. It's not true at all.

When our experiences offer very little comfort, we must remember that Christian comfort is not merely in the expectation that life will become easier. Easier. That's usually never the case. Never

the case.

You need to study history a little bit, Christian history. It said our Christian comfort must be eternally grounded in salvation. Something that this world cannot take away because the world never gave it to us. It's something that our feelings can't take away because our feelings never gave it to us.

Suffering cannot undo and death can't take away. That's comfort. Most of the comfort that we want often is temporary comfort, isn't it? Temporary comfort.

[33:16] Sort of like when we're going through trials and seasons, we say, Lord, make this stop.

Help this to end. Fix this diagnosis. Restore this relationship. Remove this pressure. Change the circumstances, Lord.

But isn't all of this just temporary comfort that we're seeking? We know that sometimes God graciously does give those things, answer those prayers, fix what sin, kind of reverse what sin has done.

But Paul offers something deeper than changed circumstances here. Much deeper. And that is eternal comfort. Paul, therefore, asks God to comfort their hearts.

Just as the heart is the center of the whole person. It's the center of thoughts, desires, affections, and decisions. So, too, God comforts us supernaturally within us, even when all hell is breaking out around us.

[34:41] Now, we might get a selfish inclination, right? Like, this is where some Christians tend to get things wrong, that the comfort that they have from the Lord can be stored up.

They can just go get that island down off the coast and just live peacefully away from people. Don't amen that.

In the hole, in the side of the hill, and just remain in that comfort, have it all stored up and protected.

But Paul says this comfort must move outward.

And that God would establish them in every good work and word. You see, grace that shapes the contours of our hearts will naturally spill out into the contours of our lives.

In other words, grace goes in before it comes out. It will shape what we say, what we do. It must. It must shape us.

[35:53] It reaches our mouth. It reaches our hands. It reaches our homes. It reaches our church. It reaches every relationship within your life. And notice here the balance.

Paul commands them to stand firm and then ask God to establish them. Stand firm and establish them.

Christian faithfulness is neither passive nor self-powered. That's the pendulum. Don't fall for that.

But we actively obey because God actively has worked within us.

It is a delight to obey the Lord, regardless of how you feel about the matter. You see, the grace that saves us also steadies us, steadies our hearts, and establishes our lives.

So how in the world am I going to make it, Paul? We should see a progression here.

[37:01] First answer, look at what God has done. He loved you. Chose you. He called you. He sanctifies you. He will glorify you.

How am I going to make it, Paul? Well, hold what God has said. Don't invent a new north. How am I going to make it, Paul?

Depend on what God supplies. The God who commands you to stand establishes you by his grace. So will you make it?

Yes. Because God's grace is sufficient. I love how John Piper says it great.

Imagine that, John Piper saying something great. He's got the one-line zingers. He says, That's worthy of a tattoo.

[38:08] You see, church, you see this point unfolding. We hold fast because God first took hold of us. So when your heart is shaken, return.

To what God has done. When the world offers another truth that makes you feel good, it seems promising, hold firmly to the apostolic word.

Not Apostle Bob, but Apostle Paul. And when obedience feels beyond your strength, depend upon the grace that God supplies.

Stand firm and hold on, church. Stand firm and hold on. Let's pray. I'm going to show you how to use the