



Elder Fred Mollon

SERMON

Stand Firm

Luke 20:27-38; II Thessalonians 2:1-5; 13-17

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

One of my assignments when I was in the Air Force happened right after the POW's came home from Vietnam. I had just arrived at my first duty station and didn't yet have my security clearance to go into the facility to start my job so I was sent to Kelly AFB, in San Antonio. I and a number of others were given the task of transcribing all of the tapes of the debriefings of these soldiers. Time and again they told stories of how some fellow POW's, who were under the same brutal conditions, just couldn't take it and capitulated, to some degree or another, and gave in to their captors. The military code to which all service members subscribed had several points, and at that time the first article said, "I am an American fighting man and I will die for my country..." Each of these POW's stated that it should be changed to read, "I am an American fighting man and I will LIVE for my country..." The emphasis being that when one is in difficult times we need to be dedicated to live through it, to stand firm in our beliefs, and not succumb and give in and thereby denying our country.

In the first century church, this was also happening. People, believers, were capitulating under the strain of persecution while others under the same sword were giving their lives to stay true to Christ. At the time of this writing and for the next couple of decades there were times of brutal persecution and oppression of the Christian community. It was one such time as this which caused Paul to write to his beloved church.

Thessalonica was a major seaport on the coast of Macedonia. It had been so since ancient times and when the Romans took control they expanded its importance. It was the seat of Roman government for Macedonia and sat on the Via Egnatia, which was the main highway stretching from Rome to the countries and provinces of the eastern Mediterranean. It was also home to various religions and fertility cults that were found throughout the empire. Further, it was a major center of the cult of emperor worship. From Acts we also learn that there was a Jewish synagogue with a large number of devout Greeks among its members. It was in this very cosmopolitan atmosphere that Paul, Timothy and Silas, or Silvanus as he is called here, had labored and preached and out of which a church was born. Now Paul is writing to encourage them because of hard times in the form of persecution.

From this letter we can get a small glimpse in to the mindset of the early church. Just like the original disciples and apostles, they had learned that Jesus' return was an important aspect of their faith; and like the original disciples, it was expected to happen "soon," whatever that meant. As time dragged on, and hard times hit, the people would naturally cry out to God for help and salvation from the persecution, as they were expecting that Jesus coming was imminent. When He didn't come, they began to wonder what was going on. It was at this kind of a moment when teachers came along, who were not of Paul, and through prophecy, preaching and teaching, and even saying that they had a letter from Paul, which they did not, they said that the day of the Lord had already come and gone. This only caused more discouragement but at the same time, they still held fast, however weakly, to the gospel that Paul had shared with them; so now Paul writes to not only refute those claims but also to encourage them.

The first thing he brings to mind is in verse 13, that God chose them. Just as we did not create ourselves so we did not “choose” of our own volition. It is a work of the Spirit, and of our responding to that work in faith. This is one of the tenets stated in Luther’s Small Catechism that not only is our faith a gift of God but our response to it is also a work of grace. Because of their response on all levels to the work of grace in their lives Paul says that he can’t help but love them and pray for them.

When hard times hit us the first thing that we need to be reminded of is that we responded to God’s message and to recognize that that alone makes us pleasing to God. Remember what Isaiah said, “be willing and obedient.” Don’t let the hard times, the difficulties of life dissuade you from the faith that was given to you and the grace that worked within you. Life is always going to throw a curveball now and again, and we may cry out “Lord, how long?” Those are the times that we need to press in to God more closely and rely on the grace He has given.

Next, in verse 14, Paul says something astonishing. He writes, “He called you to this through our gospel...” What is the “this” to which we were called? Let’s first take a look at a couple of things that Jesus said: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” [John 16:33] Jesus faced every trouble, every temptation, and every heartache that we can know. This is all a part of life. No one can escape it and that’s when we have to remember Jesus, and in Him find peace. Jesus also said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before you.” [John 15:18] Though it often does, it really should not come as a surprise that we may have difficulties, some very big problems and trials in life; but it’s to this that we are called if we are going to follow Jesus.

The question then follows, “Why?” “Why were we called to this life filled with trouble?” Paul answers that question in the next phrase of verse 14, “...that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We have to know the sufferings of Jesus if we are to share in His glory. Remember what Paul said in Philippians chapter 2, “And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name...” As one of my professors in college said, “Down here, we are in training for reigning.” If we want to reign with Him, we have to also suffer with Him. This is what was getting the Thessalonians down. They had expected that Jesus would return, but when it didn’t happen and time dragged on longer and longer, and wave after wave of persecution kept hitting, they were becoming discouraged. But as Jesus said, as the Bible gives witness, and in the words of old popular song “I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden.”

I have heard people, good believing Christian people, complain about all of the heartache they are experiencing, or how much trouble a dear friend is experiencing. They complain, “Why me, God” or “Why does my friend have to go through this; he/she is such a good person?” Quite honestly, my thought has always been, whether it’s someone in these circumstances, or even if it’s my own, “How much better it is for me, or that other believer, to have to go through this trouble, instead of some poor soul who doesn’t know God. At least I have a source of strength upon which to draw.”

Paul then concludes to his thought to his dear Thessalonians, “So then brothers and sisters stand firm in the teachings...passed on to you.” In Ephesians Paul says in chapter 6, “Therefore, take up the full armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness... (I.e. the full armor of God,) ... and pray at all times...and be on the

alert...” We shouldn’t be overtaken when trouble comes into our life. We should be praying at all times so that when things do happen, we face it, and move forward through it.

Then Paul again reminds us with whom we are dealing, “...our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope.” These folks were having a rough time of it, with troubles on the outside, and supposed believers giving them false teaching. So Paul steps in with encouragement for them by lifting them up to the heaven in their thoughts so that they could look down and see their troubles and problems with a clear perspective.

Often times when we feel like we are so under the burden of it all, we just need to be lifted up to get a clearer picture of what exactly our situation really is. We have God our Father and Jesus Himself on our side. Look at all of the trouble and problems both through His eyes and knowing that He is right beside you, standing with you. Again from Isaiah, remember that your name is tattooed on the palm of His hand. From the first verses of Genesis, to the closing verses of Revelation, there has been an ongoing revealing of just Who this God is. From before the foundations of the world, God has planned our place in this world and in life, and our final glory is Jesus.

God is to be revered and worshipped. We should ever be awe-struck with the magnificence of God. As the psalmist says, come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our God, our Maker. Life has many electives: What should I wear? What should I eat? But worship is not an elective. It is an imperative. Even the Hebrew word, “Hallelujah” is a command. He is our Father, and should be loved. “As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities us.” Then Jesus comes not to reveal His “like” a father but AS Father. “Your Father knows what you need before you ask;” “when you pray, say, Our Father.;;” Jesus prayed, “My Father.” This gives us the noble status that we are not merely above or better than the beasts of the field, but we are elevated to being just a little lower than the angels. Then, the ultimate expression of His great love for us, God becomes incarnate in Jesus, and through all of the joys and hardships of life, finally offers Himself to the sacrifice on the cross; once, for all, bearing our sin and shame; revealing how great is the Father’s love for His creation.

Finally, at the end of the age, whenever that is to happen, we are welcomed into His presence, in the New Jerusalem, “old things have passed away and all has become new,” and we join with the elders, the four living creatures, all the hosts of heaven, and all of creation, to sing the anthem, “Now is the dwelling of God with men. The kingdoms of this world HAVE BECOME the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ.” We are to live this out now. Because this is not the case, we find “opposition” to this life and become objects of hate, subject to persecutions and tribulations; but as we stand firm and walk through all of these as children of God, we will then be fit to share in Christ’s glory.

I know that some of our folks here today are going through some rough times and facing tough choices, tough decisions, almost overwhelming grief and sadness. I wish it were possible to take it away and let you all have peace. But that is not what we are called to do. We are “called to this by the gospel that we may share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So I can only encourage you to stand firm; and having done all – stand firm. You are not alone. The body of Christ is here to stand with you, and more than that, God Himself, in the face of Jesus, is with you and within you. Remember what it says in the book of Hebrews, we do not have a high priest who cannot be touched but who was tempted in every way, as we are. In Christ is your full supply for any need; and as Paul said in another place, it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Amen.