Good morning, Moon Valley!

We continue our sermon series titled, ▶ “Standing Firm When Shaken.” It is a study through the New Testament letter of 2 Thessalonians written by the apostle Paul.

Our text for today is ▶ 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17. From this text, we are going to learn important lessons in how to stand firm and hold on when life seems to be falling apart.

You may recall from previous studies that the believers in the newly established church in Thessalonica had come under intense persecution for their faith.

Moreover, their faith itself had been called into question by some who claimed that Paul’s teachings were wrong. Specifically, the false teachers asserted that the Thessalonian believers had skipped the Rapture and were already in the Tribulation, and that the hardships they were experiencing were of part of God’s wrath poured out during the Day of the Lord.

Understandably, the Thessalonians were shaken by all this.

As an encouragement, Paul issues two commands in our text. Both come in ▶ 2 Thessalonians 2:15, where he says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:15 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.

The first command is ▶ "stand firm" which is a translation of a single Greek word, στήκω (*stáy-ko*). It means to hold one's ground, to maintain a position, to be steadfast.[1]

The second command is ▶ "hold to," which is from the Greek word, κρατέω (*kraw-téh-o*). It means to remain firmly committed to something.[2]

I take the second command to be a synonymous expansion of the first, and both have the same object in view. The object—that which they are to stand firm in and hold to—is ▶ "the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter."

In modern evangelical Christian circles, we are taught to be suspicious of traditions because they don't always line up with Scripture. The word "traditions" is often used to describe religious things people have made up that overshadow the word of God. For example, in Matthew 15:3, Jesus denounces some Pharisees and scribes, saying, "why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"

But Paul is not using the term "traditions" negatively in our text. In its most basic sense, a tradition is simply something handed down from a respected authority. A tradition can be good or bad, depending on what is handed down and how it is applied.

In our text, the traditions in view are the very words of God, both spoken and written, handed down by Paul and his ministry partners to the Thessalonians. Paul is exhorting his brothers and sisters to stand firm and hold to the word of God they had taught them.

This raises the question: What exactly had Paul taught the Thessalonians?

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[1] Brannan, Rick, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020)
[2] Ibid.

We have the previous letter we call 1 Thessalonians. But we don't know what Paul taught them orally, in person, which likely constitutes the great majority of his teaching.

He could not have taught them through the entire Bible. Two reasons. First, he didn't have enough time. And second, the full New Testament as we know it did not yet exist. It was in process.

It would be nice to know the specific teachings to which Paul is referring, particularly because they were the teachings helpful to the Thessalonians when their lives were falling apart.

Thankfully, we are not completely in the dark. Two words at the beginning of verse 15 give us a clue: ▶ "So then." These two words point us back to the immediately preceding context—▶ verses 13 and 14—as the basis for the two commands here in verse 15.

Paul peppers verses 13 and 14 with key words and phrases that serve as reminders of what he taught. On commentator observes, "There is a great deal of deep theology bound up in the simple statements of these two verses."[3]

Our task, then, is to work our way through verses 13 and 14, identifying key words and phrases, so that we can retrace what Paul taught. In doing so, we will be encouraged as the Thessalonians were, particularly when it feels like life is falling apart.

I find that the words and phrases Paul uses as reminders generally fall into two categories: first, who you are in Christ, and second, where you are in history. So, we are going to start a list with the heading, ▶ "Who & Where You Are."

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[3] Ryrie, Charles C., First & Second Thessalonians, *Everyman's Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2001), 120.

And this list will be at the heart of the big idea I draw from the text: ▶ Stand firm and hold to who you are in Christ and where you are in history, according to God's word.

When it feels like life is falling apart, we can be encouraged by rehearsing and reminding ourselves of scriptural truths regarding our identity in Christ and our place in history.

▶ "Stand firm" and "hold to" are simply the commands borrowed directly from verse 15.

▶ "According to God's word" is just a paraphrase of Paul's words, "the traditions that you were taught by us."

And ▶ "who you are in Christ and where you are in history" is what we're about to flesh out from verses 13 and 14.

Let's work our way through the text.

In ▶ verse 13, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:13 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.

Paul addresses the Thessalonians as ▶ "brothers." This term is not just a nicety. It speaks to who they are in Christ. They are adopted into God's forever family. Paul and the Thessalonians are related by faith. They are children of their heavenly Father.

I won't show it on the screen, but John 1:12 explains,

> ESV John 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

We can personalize this with the first entry in our who-and-where-you-are list: ▶ "I am an adopted child of God with a spiritual family."

A family is a primary source of a child's wellbeing. It represents a loving, nurturing, supportive environment that promotes the growth and development of the child. It is a haven of safety.

Of course, our earthly families do not always live up to these ideals and neither does the church.

But our heavenly Father is all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, and ever-present. And he is at work in and through his children and family to advance his purposes and our wellbeing.

When life seems to be falling apart, it is good to remind ourselves: I am an adopted child of God with a spiritual family.

In ▶ verse 13, Paul also says that the Thessalonians are "beloved by the Lord." The word "beloved" comes from the Greek word ἀγαπάω (*ah-gah-páh-o*). This word does not describe the prevailing modern notion of love. It does not describe God's warm feelings or fond affection. Rather, this is the highest form of love, in which God continually seeks our best interests, sometimes at great cost to himself. Coming in the person of Jesus to die on the cross for us is an example of this kind of love.

So, we can add to our list a second statement about our identity: ▶ "I am loved by God, who has my best interests at heart."

When life if falling apart, it can be so hard to trust that God has our best interests at heart. How could he when we are in so much pain? Wouldn't it be better if we didn't have to go through such hardship?

The truth is God is the only one whom we can trust with our best interests. We can't even trust ourselves. Recently, in our men's group that meets here on Thursdays at 6:00PM, we learned that I don't have my own best interests at heart because I don't know the future.

But God does. He is the only one who has a perfectly eternal perspective. And he is the only one who loves me perfectly.

And so, in the midst of suffering, it is of great comfort to know that I am loved by God, who has my best interests at heart.

In ▶ verse 13, Paul also says, "God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved." "Firstfruits" simply means the first ones, indicating that the ones to whom Paul is writing were among the first to be saved in Thessalonica, which is true.

Nevertheless, there is a textual variant that gives rise to two different translations. If you happen to be using the *New American Standard Bible*, or the *Christian Standard Bible*, or the *New King James Version*, it reads differently—something like "God chose you *from the beginning* to be saved."

Turns out that, as ancient scribes made hand-written copies of our text, "the [Greek] word for 'firstfruits' could have easily been confused for the expression 'from the beginning,' or vice versa."[4] Indeed, some Greek manuscripts say "firstfruits"; others say, "from the beginning." We are left to choose which reading is original and which is the mistake of an ancient scribe, who copied the original incorrectly.

[4] Comfort, Philip W., *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2008), 654

Scholars have different opinions on which reading is original and, thus, we have different translations. Good arguments can be made on both sides, but I believe "firstfruits" makes the most sense. And this is the leaning of some prominent experts in textual criticism, which is the study of reconstructing the original reading from differing ancient manuscripts.[5]

Saying that God chose them as the firstfruits to be saved would have been encouraging to the Thessalonians on at least two counts.

First, it explains why the Thessalonians are facing persecution. On a persecution continuum, the first to be saved would be at one end, with the last to be saved at the other. If you are the last to be saved in a given locale, you get less persecution because there are more believers to support you and fewer believers to oppose you. In contrast, the first ones to be saved start out as a tiny minority, easily oppressed.

Second, saying that God chose them as the firstfruits carries a responsibility—a responsibility to do all they can to make sure they aren't the last. They have the honor and charge to help start the Christian movement in Thessalonica.

This relates to who they are in Christ and where they are in history. God chose them to be the forerunners. They are the pioneers. They are the ground-breakers.

This gives their suffering meaning.

As such, we can add a ▶ third entry to our list: "My life has a God-given purpose right where I am."

[5] For example, Metzger classifies the "firstfruits" reading with a "B," meaning "the text is almost certain." Metzger, Bruce M., *A Textual Commentary On the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: American Bible Society, 2002).

Today, we are not the firstfruits to be saved in ancient Thessalonica. But many of us are firstfruits somewhere, right where we are. And all believers have the responsibility to bring the life of Jesus to our world.

For example, God chose me as the first to be saved in my immediate family. Very quickly I realized that being the first came with a responsibility. God chose me to be the first for a reason: to bring the life of Jesus the rest of my family.

We are still in the church age, between the first and second coming of Christ. That is where we are in history. Our purpose in this age is to bring the life the Jesus to our world until he comes. God chose us for that purpose. On the heels of his first advent, just before he ascended to heaven, Jesus gave us the assignment: "I am sending you. Go. Make disciples. Be my witnesses. Bring life."

Now, I would like to spend a few moments thinking about what Paul means when he says the Thessalonians are "saved." Biblical teachings in general and Paul's teachings in particular present salvation as a much broader idea than we commonly think of it in modern America. I am showing ▶ a diagram on the screen to help us think through Paul's teachings on salvation that he likely conveyed to the Thessalonians. I have used this diagram before, so you may recognize it.

The ▶ yellow, upward-pointing arrow on the left represents the point in time when you first come to believe in Jesus Christ. That is the moment you are born again and receive eternal life. Eternal life is represented by the blue arrow on top, pointing to the right, toward heaven and into eternity.

As indicated by the green section below, the moment you believe, God saves you from the penalty of sin. That's another way of saying he justifies you. In that moment, Christ's sacrifice pays all your sin debts and

Christ's righteousness is credited to you. This is probably the aspect of salvation that first comes to mind when you hear the biblical term "saved." But justification is only one kind of salvation believers experience.

In the diagram, the ▶ span of time between the two yellow, upward-pointing arrows is your life on earth as a believer. It is represented by the red section below. Here, as you follow the Lord, God also saves you, but in a different way. He saves you from the power of sin. That's another way of saying he sanctifies you. As part of the sanctification process, God, through the Spirit, empowers you to become more and more Christlike as you follow him. This is not a one-time event; it is a life-long process.

The ▶ second yellow, upward-pointing arrow represents the point in time when you die physically or the point when you are raptured, if you happen be alive when Christ returns. As represented by the purple part below, you are then saved in yet another way. You are saved from the very presence of sin in heaven. That is, God glorifies you. As part of glorification, you are rewarded by the Lord, according to how you followed him on earth. Another way of saying it is that you obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I would also add that our glorification includes being saved from the Tribulation, which was important to the Thessalonians because, as you may recall, they had received the fake news that that they were already in the Tribulation.

To summarize with the help of ▶ three pointing hands on the screen, I can say, as a believer, that I have been saved in the past, I am being saved in the present, and I will be saved in the future, according to the three types of salvation: justification, sanctification, and glorification.

While I'm pretty sure Paul didn't use PowerPoint or a diagram, he most likely taught the Thessalonians about all these aspects of salvation.

How do we know?

Because he touches on all three in our text.

In the last part of ▶ verse 13, he says that the Thessalonians are saved "through . . . belief in the truth." This is a reference to justification salvation, where you believe the truth that Jesus the Son of God died and rose again to be your Savior, and then God saves you from the penalty of your sin.

So, we can add a fourth entry to our list: ▶ "I am saved from the penalty of my sin through faith."

This would have been an encouraging reminder to the Thessalonians that whatever they were suffering was not in payment for their sin because Christ had already paid that price for them, and they had appropriated Christ's payment through faith. Whatever they were suffering was not a form of God's rejection because God had already accepted them once and for all in Christ.

In the last part of ▶ verse 13, Paul also says they are saved "through sanctification by the Spirit." This is a reference to the second kind of salvation, sanctification. It's where you as a believer follow the Lord, and God saves you from the power of sin so that you become more and more like Christ.

So, we can add a ▶ fifth entry to our list: "I am empowered by the Spirit to be Christlike."

This would have been encouraging to the Thessalonians because it reminded them that they had everything they really needed to navigate their hardships in a Christlike way. They were suffering in the likeness of Christ. And through the Spirit, they could face the suffering as Christ did, faithfully, humbly, courageously, graciously, with Christlike love for others. Not by white knuckling it. But by relying on the Spirit.

Okay. We've covered one verse! Let's move on.

In ▶ verse 14, Paul says,

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:14 To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The two introductory words ▶ "to this" point back to the salvation Paul just mentioned in verse 13; specifically, the first two parts he highlighted: justification and sanctification. God called them to the first two parts of salvation because they serve as the basis for the third. God called them to be justified and sanctified so that they may be glorified. That is what Paul means when he says, ▶ "so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Based on this, we can add a ▶ sixth and final entry to our list: "I am called to live this life as an investment in the next."

This would have been an encouraging reminder for the Thessalonians.

This speaks to where we are in our personal history. As believers, we are in the sanctification part of eternal life.

The present sanctification is the hard part. Jesus tells us, "in this world you will have trouble" (NIV). But the trouble is not a waste. For the harder our story is, the greater our glory can be, if we are faithful.

What we will experience in the coming glorification part depends on how we live now. To the extent that we live faithfully for Jesus and grow in Christlikeness, we will be rewarded in the next phase of eternal life. And the rewards will be enjoyed forever in glory.

Suffering and sacrificing for Jesus in this life is a highly leveraged investment in the next. Following Jesus will pay off in spades.

Having worked our way through verses 13 and 14, we can now stand back and link the big idea with the list.

The ▶ big idea is this: Stand firm and hold to who you are in Christ and where you are in history, according to God's word.

And ▶ who and where you are can be summarized by six truths.

1. I am an adopted child of God with a spiritual family.
2. I am loved by God, who has my best interests at heart.
3. My life has a God-given purpose right where I am.
4. I am saved from the penalty of my sin through faith.
5. I am empowered by the Spirit to be Christlike.
6. I am called to live this life as an investment in the next.

Now that is some good material to put on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror! In fact, I have made hard copies of this slide and put them on the Connect Counter in the lobby for you to pick up as you leave.

The last two verses in our text, ▶ verses 16 and 17, serve as a benediction or prayer in light of what has just been presented. So, let me just read them as my closing prayer for you.

> ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good

hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Amen.