Before I begin today’s sermon I want to express my deep gratitude for all the cards, thoughts, conversations, and prayers expressed to me and my family in the days following the death of my mother. We rejoice in the wholeness that she experiences in the Lord’s presence, although we do miss her.

The site of mom’s burial is just a quarter mile away from the farm on which I grew up. That proximity helped to stir many memories. One that relates to today’s sermon is the old oaken wheels that lay around the farmyard. They were from wagons that my grandfather had used in his farming operations. To a young boy the spokes of those wheels made wonderful imaginary guns for use in playing army around the farm. They were sturdy, tapered like the barrel of a rifle, and obviously didn’t cost anything.

One of the structural aspects of these wheels, as with any wheel, is the center section, or the hub. The spokes of the wheel are all anchored in that hub, becoming both a visual and operational focal point.

I want to carry that image into the passage for today’s sermon. What I suggest is that verse 15 of chapter 2 is the hub. So we will spend our initial time focused there; then we will “attach” the surrounding verses to that hub. With this perspective in mind I will now read our text for the morning.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5 (ESV)

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. 14 To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 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. 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. 18 Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, 19 and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. 20 But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. 21 And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. 22 May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Sermon in a sentence: Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth, knowing you have a firm foundation.
A two-fold exhortation 2:15

The exhortation in verse 15 is two-fold. We are to stand firm, and hold to the traditions we’ve been taught. Let’s first look at these separately, and then in relationship to each other.

“stand firm”

Paul mostly uses this verb in the imperative form; so is the case here. The foundational idea is stability, not being pushed aside or out of position. What are some of the dangers being faced by the church in Thessalonica that warrant this command? Persecution – of some intensity; misinformation or lack of information about certain Biblical doctrines; inaccurate teaching that has shaken them about the day of the Lord (2:2); and the immediately preceding verses speak of deception that will occur in conjunction with the appearance of the antichrist. These all could contribute to the arousal of fear and insecurity; thus the appropriateness of this command.

This same term is found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, where he states in 16:13-14, “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” The opposition to the gospel in Corinth was likely less intense yet no less real than the opposition that was occurring in Thessalonica. Yet the need to stand firm is appropriate in either situation. In fact, Biblical teaching presents the reality that all believers need to hear this exhortation regularly, regardless of the circumstances that we face. That is demonstrated by other usages of this command as found in Galatians 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” and Philippians 4:1, “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

“hold to”

The companion exhortation is to hold to the traditions that Paul taught to the Thessalonian believers. Two terms require explanation. The root concept of the word “hold” conveys significant force or strength. It is an action that is to occur with intention, focus, and determination. When used in the Gospels this term describes the attempts of the opponents of Jesus to arrest Him, to lay hands on Him. Obviously, that is something that they sought to do forcefully! And once he was in their grasp they had no intention of releasing their hold. In our context today, the exhortation is to hold to the traditions i.e. that which has been handed over, transmitted, or passed along. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy preached the gospel in Thessalonica, and then to those who responded in faith they continued by teaching what Paul refers to in Acts 20:27 as “the whole counsel of God.” They did so both in person and through writing. This teaching was rooted in Paul’s apostolic authority given him by Christ. An accurate phrasing of verse 15 would read: “So then, my dear fellow believers stand firm in your faith and keep your grasp securely on the word of truth that you were taught by us.”

You may recall that early in 2 Thessalonians (1:4) Paul wrote that he boasted about their steadfastness and faith in all the persecutions they face. Even with that being true, he recognizes the ongoing difficulties that they face and believes it necessary to urge them to be continually vigilant in living out their faith in Christ. Regardless of the circumstances in which any believer
may find themselves, we have an enemy that contends against our faith. 1 Peter 5:8-9 says, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

The challenge that I desire for us to leave with this morning is the necessity of standing firm in our faith and holding to the truth, regardless of life’s circumstances. Those circumstances are likely much different than that of the Thessalonians, but the need is of equal importance. Are you currently without employment and looking for full-time work? Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth. Are you in the midst of a time when you are uncertain of the direction of God’s leading in your life? Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth. Do you find the environment at school hostile to following Christ? Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth. Are you or a family member experiencing significant illness? Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth. Are you in the middle of a time of spiritual dryness or lethargy? Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth. Are you in a season of life where you find yourself facing the same temptation repeatedly? Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth.

Clearly these exhortations are intricately intertwined. Standing firm in one’s faith requires holding to the truth. And holding to the truth is critical to standing firm. We need to hear both exhortations today. But we would remiss if we would do so without the benefit of the surrounding verses, which are rich in affirmation and encouragement. Let’s turn our attention there now.

The foundation for an obedient response

The support, prayer, and encouragement of fellow believers (2:13a; 3:1-2, 4)

As we commit to standing firm and holding to the truth, we are to draw on the support, prayer and encouragement of fellow believers. Look first to 2:13, “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord…” Similar wording is found at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians (1:2), “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers…” and at the beginning of 2 Thessalonians (1:3), “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right…” I confess that there are times when I read the word “ought” that I sense a subtle yet almost automatic resistance. I believe my response is ultimately one of independence; I don’t want someone suggesting to me what I should do. That response, however, is contrary to the Biblical understanding which speaks from the perspective of corporate interrelationships within the body of Christ.

When an individual trusts Christ for salvation they become part of the body of Christ, the church. As individuals within the body of Christ we have both privileges and responsibilities. In every positive sense of the term we “owe” it to one another to give thanks to God for his work in each other’s life and we “owe” it to fellow believers to pray for them. Those actions are crucial resources as we together seek to stand firm in our faith and hold to the truth.

It is no surprise as we look ahead into chapter 3 to find Paul making request for prayer for himself. “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be
honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.” Paul understands his own need to stand firm, to stay the course, and requests prayer from the Thessalonian church that he might do so. There is a sense of urgency in this request; one commentary suggested the title for these theses two verses as “Paul craves their prayers for himself.” First, he wants them to pray that the gospel would continue to spread and be received. Paul wants divine intervention so that the gospel may spread rapidly. That is not something that will occur merely through human effort. And it will not occur just because he as an apostle boldly and persistently shares the gospel. The message needs God’s empowerment. Literally, the desire stated here is that the gospel may run…that it may run ahead without hindrance or interference. His request is that the gospel would be honored through acceptance and belief; just as it had occurred in Thessalonica.

One of the sections in our bulletin prayer insert is titled “The Gospel in the World.” Our intent reflects that which is expressed here by Paul; to join with those who primarily have invested themselves in sharing the gospel. While we should all be doing that, there are some in the body of Christ who give dedicated attention to that activity. We can participate in the gospel running ahead through the work that they do in our prayers. We ought to do that.

The second part of Paul’s request is more personal. He faces opposition from those he describes as wicked and evil men. The adjectives here indicate that the actions of these opponents to the gospel are intentional, offensive, and even perverse. Their opposition is clear evidence that they do not believe the gospel. Faced with that situation Paul requests prayer, I believe, so that he might stand firm in his faith and hold to the truth by continuing to present the gospel.

Today as we hear the exhortation to stand firm in our faith and hold to the truth, I trust that we hear that with a commitment to pray for one another. Pray for me (the ministry staff, the elders, etc.) to stand firm in my faith and hold to the truth; I’ll pray for you in kind. Beyond our prayers for one another we also need to develop the habit of verbally encouraging one another to stand firm (in our walk with Christ). That is what occurs in 3:4, “And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.” Paul knows these believers and is persuaded that they will remain true to their faith in Christ. Such words of encouragement can speak powerfully into the heart of fellow believers!

An understanding of salvation (2:13-14; 3:2b)

In addition to the support, prayer and encouragement of fellow-believers being beneficial for us in standing firm in our faith, there are additional considerations that we find in today’s passage. The next one we encounter is the importance of having a clear and settled understanding of our salvation. Before speaking to that directly it will be worth our time to read some of the verses that were addressed in last Sunday’s sermon. We’ll begin at verse 9. “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing because they refused to loved the truth and be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”
As we continue now into verses 13-14, look for clear and distinct contrasts. “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 (A better rendering is in the footnotes – 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.”

Here are some of the most notable contrasts between these two passages: Refusal of the truth and salvation versus belief in the truth and being saved; the activity of Satan which occurs in the context of lawlessness and falsehood versus the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit that leads to righteousness and obedience; and the end result of condemnation for those who do not believe the truth versus the end result of obtaining the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These contrasts emphasize the profound impact of salvation. It has its foundation in the sovereign actions of the eternal God. It involves the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit; conviction of sin, regeneration to new life in Christ, and empowerment for righteous living. A critical factor is the response of faith or belief in the truth (because not all have faith, 3:2b).

Further, we see in verse 14 the effect of salvation, “To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The effect of the gospel received is that the believer joins in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his commentary on this passage Gene Green writes, “For the Christians in Thessalonica, the promise of receiving this exalted honor would have been a great comfort and encouragement in light of the dishonor they suffered in their communities because of their adherence to the One who was humiliated on the cross.”

What a critical resource or foundation upon which to stand firm in our faith. How beneficial to preach the gospel to ourselves repeatedly. How important to grasp again and again the greatness of our salvation.

Let’s pause briefly and let the following passages of Scripture reinforce this reality. Deut. 7:6-8, “The Lord did not set his affection on you (Israel) and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples...But it was because the Lord loved you.” Eph. 1:4, “even as he (God the Father) chose us in him (Jesus Christ) before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him.” 1 Cor. 15:1-3a, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you...” Rom. 5:1-2, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

“The Hope Diamond, described as the most perfect blue diamond in the world, is one of the most highly prized gems on the planet, with an estimated value of $250 million dollars. It has an amazing history, having been originally in the possession of King Louis XIV. Catherine the Great had it for a time, as well as King George IV. Despite the diamond's enormous value, one of its more eccentric owners often strapped it to her dog's collar. Eventually the jewel came into the possession of diamond merchant Harry Winston, who donated it to the Smithsonian Institution. Amazingly, Winston sent the diamond in a box wrapped in a brown paper to the Smithsonian via
registered mail at a cost of $145.29. Today the Hope Diamond sits on display behind bullet-proof glass at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

Something more valuable than the Hope Diamond also goes unappreciated sometimes. I am speaking of our personal salvation, the incredible gift that God gives to every person who puts his or her faith in Jesus Christ. It is the greatest thing God has given to each of us, yet we often take it for granted.

When the disciples were empowered by God to do miracles and cast out demons, they were excited over the fact that demons came out at their command. But Jesus told them, ‘Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven’ (Luke 10:20). In effect, Jesus was telling them to get the big picture, to realize there is nothing more important than salvation.

That is why the Bible describes it as ‘so great a great salvation’ (Hebrews 2:3). And it becomes ours when we believe in Christ.”

Friends, let us stand firm today in our faith and hold to the truth. We have the prayers of one another encircling us, we are buttressed by the encouragement we mutually give, and we have so great a salvation.

**God’s powerful working within us (2:16-17; 3:3, 5)**

But there’s more; more to our understanding of our great salvation and to the power of God working within the believer’s life. “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.” In this benediction in verses 16-17 we are presented with the promise of God’s comfort amid the trials of life and the challenges of living our faith and we have the assurance of his faithful work in the continual establishment of our faith.

To grasp just a bit of the breadth of what is addressed I want us to focus on two words: “comfort” and “establish.” When Jesus states in John 14:16 that he “will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the spirit of Truth...” “Helper” is of the same root as the word “comfort.” The word refers to someone called to one’s side to help however and whenever needed. In 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 we are told both that God is already standing beside us to help however we need (verse 16), and that he will do so in the future (verse 17). As he stands beside us all of his actions flow from his love, the help he gives us is eternal, it produces hope, and it is lavished upon us through grace.

“And may that continue” is the essence of the benediction prayer in verse 17. May we continue to experience God’s comfort; and even beyond that may we be established in every good work and word! “Establish” conveys that concept of stability. It gives the picture of someone providing support, with a more specific image of a craftsman fixing something so that it stands upright and immovable. This is something we can be assured of, that we can count on because,

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1 This illustration is taken from *Daily Devotions* by Greg Laurie
as 3:3 states, “But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you (the same verb as in 2:17 – only here in the future tense) and guard you (speaks of a deliberate and conscious watching) against the evil one (because we indeed, do have an enemy who doesn’t want us to stand firm).”

And oh, by the way, if we need any additional encouragement, there is another benediction in 3:5 that both reinforces previous instruction and adds one additional resource we can draw from as we commit to stand firm in our faith and hold to the truth. “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.” God’s love has been a prominent subject in the Scriptures we’ve considered today. We cannot be reminded enough of the greatness of God’s love. May our hearts be increasingly drawn to live on that foundation. And may we also look to and follow the example of Christ’s steadfastness. He stood fast, stood firm, held out, and persisted in his steadfast obedience and submission to the Father’s will. As Heb. 12:2-3 states, “…looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

I close with this thought: I obviously am not aware of what circumstances many of you are experiencing today as you participate in this worship service. In fact, we may know little about what trials or temptations are being faced by others sitting near us. I am reasonably confident in observing that your situation is likely different from what was occurring in Thessalonica. And it is likely different from what it would be like to currently be a believer in Egypt, Japan, or Libya. Regardless, the exhortation to stand firm in our faith and hold to the truth is perpetually appropriate. And the resources from which to respond are available to every believer. May God himself and his word exhort us, encourage us, and empower us as we soon depart from this time of corporate worship.

We’ll close as we begin, with the Sermon in a Sentence: Stand firm in your faith and hold to the truth, knowing you have a firm foundation.