

“Stand Firm, Hold Fast”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana  
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## **2 Thessalonians 2: 1-5, 13-17**

What causes people to leave the church? What causes churches to split? Why does the Body of Christ struggle so often with being united in God’s Spirit?

Sometimes people leave when they feel offended or hurt by the words or actions of others in the church. Sometimes churches split over the actions of a pastor or a faction within the church that misinforms or misleads a group of people. Sometimes people leave due to unhappiness with changes in music, or worship styles, or outreach emphases, or decisions made at the denominational level. Sometimes people leave for reasons which they will never fully reveal, and unfortunately those who remain are left wondering why.

Sometimes people will leave a church for another church. And sometimes people will leave church and never return. Those have been the most painful stories for me to hear. When someone has experienced pain in a significant way within the life of a congregation, it can be damaging to their psyche and their faith. For some, they might return to the life of a congregation, but they won’t put themselves in a position of vulnerability again, such as serving as a leader. For others, though, it is incredibly challenging to just think about walking through the doors of another church after what they have experienced in their past. In my life, those have been the people I have most deeply appreciated, when they have taken the courageous step back into a congregation. The church as a whole has not always had the best track record of seeking, as we say in our ordination vows, “to build up the peace, unity and purity of the church.”

The church in Thessalonica was a church full of confusion and high anxiety, even on the verge of schism. It was one of the churches that Paul founded early in his ministry, and the first letter to the Thessalonians reflects a more comforting, pastoral, compassionate tone. What has changed from the first to the second letters? Primarily, a false teaching which has gripped the Thessalonians with fear, and causes Paul to rebut this teaching in a forceful and passionate way. And perhaps, in the midst of this ancient conversation between a pastor and his flock, we are called to hear God’s guidance and direction to stand firm and hold fast to what we have been taught, so that our hearts and minds are comforted and strengthened by every good work and deed we do (2:15,17).

What is the false teaching that has gotten the Thessalonians into such an agitated state? That the “Day of the Lord,” the return of Jesus Christ, was already at hand. Barbara Blodgett writes: *This apparently referred to the day*

*when all righteous believers would be judged worthy and gathered up to meet the Lord upon his coming again. In his first letter to the Thessalonian community, Paul had stressed the nearness of the Day of the Lord and the nearness of the Thessalonians' salvation, so as to keep hope alive, given the hardships and persecutions they were facing. In this second letter, however, the emphasis is reversed and now they are reminded that, though still very near, the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived. The Thessalonians lived in a time of heightened expectation that the end of the world would be coming soon, so they were apparently worked up into an apocalyptic frenzy. The writer's insistence that the Day of the Lord had not yet arrived would have been reassuring* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 278*).

And in the opening verses of this passage, we hear Paul's strong pleas for the community of faith remembering what he himself taught them: "We beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed . . . (2:1-2)" "Let no one deceive you in any way . . . (2:3)" "Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? (2:5)" It is a pastor pleading with his flock to not be deceived by the teachings of any who claim to be him. Paul wants these new believers to trust that God will be with them, through the grace of their Lord, Jesus Christ, and that shall give them hope amid the struggles they are currently enduring.

Struggles and anxiety are still a common occurrence in our life as the church. Rumors can grow into perceived realities so fast that it is hard to know what is truth and what is untruth. Anxiety can elevate over perceptions instead of concrete realities. Fear replaces faith, and we can make decisions that are motivated by fear, rather than faith. Even today, we still struggle as the church with false teachings that drain our energy rather than rejuvenating our spirit.

In the second half of this passage, notice what Paul does to address this fear. Instead of escalating the fear of the Thessalonians, he replaces it with gratitude and encouragement. "But we must always give thanks to God for you, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification . . . and through belief in the truth" (2:13). Paul reassures them that they were chosen for this – through the proclamation of the good news – so that they might know God's glory in Jesus Christ. There's nothing to fear – God chose them for this purpose, so they might know the truth Paul has already taught them.

As a result, they are encouraged to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions" of Paul and his disciples. Paul knows the gift of faith that is in the hearts of the Thessalonians, and he reaffirms that faith, trusting that they will continue to do "every good work and deed" until Jesus does come – whenever that may be. Instead of worrying about when the Lord will come again, they are encouraged to keep living faithfully in expectant hope, as Christ wishes for them to live.

Neta Pringle writes: *The story is told that one day back in early Puritan New England there was a major eclipse. The sun was blotted out, the day*

*turned dark, and people were terrified. "The world is going to end. What shall we do?" One insightful man replied, "Let us be found doing our duty."*

*Think about it. As a parent, was it not wonderful to leave the kids alone for a few hours and come home to find things in order? You took pride in the fact that all was well. I think God is like that. When the Day of the Lord does come, when God no longer limits God's power in the world, when evil is finally banished, God wants to find us at work for those things that are dear to the heart of God. Our task is to keep on keeping on (ibid, 282).*

I began by speaking of schism, of anxiety, of what causes people to step away from the church. I had that first-hand experience this year during my sabbatical. For four months, I did not walk through these doors. I stayed away from you, taking an intentional break from the stresses of work in order to reorient and refocus. Some Sundays, I went to other churches. Other Sundays, I stayed at home, or we were travelling, and I did not attend worship.

I now see how easy it is to simply walk away from church. I could not see it before sabbatical, but now I see why people say, "Enough," and either stop coming or go and find a new place that meets their perceived needs. It's very easy to leave behind the hurt, the disagreements, and the uncomfortable. It's very easy to get into a new routine that is self-soothing and self-gratifying. I get it now. I realized that the only way for me to rejuvenate my spirit and allow my heart to sing anew was to take this intentional time away from you, and I know that I wouldn't be in the better place I am today if I had not had that opportunity.

But the moment I knew I did not want that to become my new reality was when my grandmother died. That was the moment when I yearned for the community of faith deeply. When I was in pain and grief and loss, I wished to have the church surround me with its love and care and support. That's when I realized that no matter how much strain or struggle we might be having on the surface within the community of faith, that is overwhelmed by the depth of God's love which permeates our relationships in Jesus Christ.

At first, it might seem easier and less painful to walk away. But where will that leave us when a crisis or deep need befalls us? What false teaching will we be tempted to follow, instead of recognizing the truth in our love as brothers and sisters in Christ? How do we stand fast in our faith, hold firm in our care, and strengthen in us every good work and word that we do and speak?

I am grateful for you in my life, now more than ever before. How are you grateful for this community of faith, and how do your actions and commitments reflect that gratitude?

Thanks be to God for his love for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.