

Stay the Course

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Over the last couple weeks, the apostle Paul has stressed the recurring theme of stability—of staying the course, of not being shaken. In week one, we considered how important it is to keep our eyes fixed on our destination so as to stay the course. Last week, we learned to not be easily unsettled by fake news or deceptive rumors but rather to protect ourselves by knowing and loving Jesus.

John Stott has observed that the previous two passages, which we've studied, have each addressed different ways that Satan will attempt to propagate instability.¹ In week one, Stott points out that Paul was addressing the potential for instability through the opposition or persecution of believers while, in week two, he points out that Paul was addressing the potential for instability through the spread of fake news or false teachings. These are simply a couple of tools Satan tries to use to bring chaos and disorder to the church. But, we'll see this week that those aren't the only ones he keeps in his toolbox.

This week Paul will address a third tool which Satan uses to create instability in the church—the tool of temptation. The devil loves to seduce believers into sin against God and rebellion against his ways. This isn't alien to us. This is the frontline of our struggle; isn't it? We have a lot to learn at this point.

So, let's see what God would teach us.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

¹³ But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

¹ See John Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time*, 174.

¹⁶ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷ encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

How will believers stand firm in the midst of the temptations the devil plots against them? How will they not be led astray like those Paul just warned them about in last week's passage? How will they keep from delighting "in wickedness" (v. 12)? We must admit that we know this temptation is real. How do we fight it?

Well, Paul tells us to do three things. Paul tells us: (1st) believe in the truth, (2nd) hold onto the truth, and (3rd) live out the truth. Would you like to stand firm? Do you want to war against a heart that's prone to wander? A tempted, sinful heart? If so, then be about these three things, says Paul.

Let's look at each.

1. Believe in the truth (vv. 13-14).

Today's text starts with the little word *but*. And, this is a signal to us that Paul is contrasting what he's going to say now with what he just said directly before this. So, what was that? What was he just speaking about? Well, it was a largescale revolt against God; wasn't it? It was a monstrous turning away from the truth of the Lord because of the temptation and allure of the man of chaos.

Understandably, therefore, the believers in Thessalonica want some assurance that the same won't happen to them. This is a reasonable concern. They are after all under immense pressure—persecutions from without and false teachers from within. The temptation to simply abandon it all must have been real.

Friends, I know there are times when I wonder if it wouldn't simply be easier for me if I just chucked it all. There are times when I wonder if I should be a pastor (like in the midst of a pandemic); there are days when I think how nice it would be if I could just live however I choose. No rules but the ones I choose to create for me! My money? Mine. My time? Mine. My relationships? Mine. If we're being honest, friends, this temptation is often before us in one way or another.

Yet, at these times, I find it helpful to lookback upon God's work in my life since I trusted in him and believed the gospel. When I do that, I can see his blessings

in my life. I can see how he's worked on me through my faith. How he's transformed and is transforming me for the better. And more than that, when I consider the faith of others and how Jesus has changed them for the better. I see that the gospel is true. *I believe in the truth.* And, the temptations to abandon it all—to live for myself—begin to lose their shine.

Isn't this what Paul is telling believers to do? To consider all that we've seen? To recall all the Lord's work in us? And to believe in the truth? Think of God's love for you and the sanctifying work of his Spirit in you, the apostle Paul says (v. 13), and be strengthened in your belief—be encouraged in the truth.

Before we move on, let me just say how important it is to have a church family alongside you at this point. We need other brothers and sisters in Christ in our lives if we're going to believe the truth—*because* we were made to believe in community. Not so other Christians can pat us on the back as they believe exactly like we believe. (Though, certainly, there will be some encouragement in having others around us who share and support our beliefs. That is a blessing of the church.) Instead of that, I'm thinking of the benefit of having those near us who exercise our faith in Christ—having those around us whose beliefs help knock off the rough edges of our beliefs. This is one of the great blessings of lifelong membership in the church.

This is one of the ways we believe in *the* truth as opposed to simply *a* truth—some personalized gospel or some cultural Christianity. These will fall before Satan. Personal or cultural truths will not stand in the face of temptation.

What will stand, however, is the belief that's been seasoned by the fellowship of Christians who are unlike you. Christians from different generations than you are; Christians with more or less money than you have; Christians whose politics aren't like your politics; Christians with a different cultural history than yours. It's people like these who will both sharpen and expand our belief in the veracity of the gospel of Jesus Christ—helping it stand against Satan's attacks.

Friends, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, no matter how much you make or how smart you are, you have something to offer this church. God calls you into this fellowship to help me and others believe in his gospel truths. Praise Jesus for that! Amen.

2. Hold onto the truth (v. 15).

Look at the passage with me again. After encouraging us to believe the truth, Paul says this:

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (v. 15).

Certainly, it was important for the Thessalonians to stand firm in their context because they were being persecuted and lied to and tempted to abandon their faith. So, we get Paul's charge to "stand firm" here. Yet, I don't think it's merely a charge for them. I think it's a charge for all Christians in all times.

Os Guinness shares about a time in which he visited John Stott toward the end of the influential pastor and theologian's life. The two men spoke for a good while then, as Guinness was about to leave, he asked his friend how he could pray for him. Stott's answer was simple but profound. He just wanted to remain faithful to the end. This pastor, who had served the Lord so well over his lifetime, was most concerned about standing firm and serving well to the last.²

I have a friend in Pennsylvania who's now in his 80s. He was once very active and, in his youth, a great athlete. Throughout his life, he served the church vigorously in many ways—as an educator, as a deacon, as a faithful husband. Toward the end of my time there, he would often lament that he couldn't do much to serve the church because he wasn't physically able anymore. Yet, I always thought and often told him that that simply wasn't the case. He was serving the church every Sunday morning when he walked through those church doors, always with a smile on his face, earlier than anyone else, ready to greet the greeters when they arrived. He was serving us whenever he signed the members in for our congregational meetings and made sure we had a quorum. He was serving the church by showing us how to keep the faith and stand firm to the end.

That, friends, is a profound ministry! It's irreplaceable! I pray it's a ministry we might all be allowed by the Lord to perform someday. Amen!

Well, before we move on, notice the content of such perseverance in the faith. Notice how Paul tells us to stand firm. The apostle tells us to do it by holding fast—"to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or...letter" (v. 15). This is the authority on which we take our stand. This is why we as a church believe

² Os Guinness, *Impossible People*, chapter 1.

and preach the Bible. This is why one of the Free Church mantras has been to ask: “Where stands it written?”³ In short, where do you find it in Scripture?

Friends, Christians should be a people of the Book—of the Bible.

Sadly, this is very often not the case in many churches today. Many churches edit or marginalize or simply ignore Scripture. I recall helping a friend plant a church in Driggs, Idaho—a little community just to the west of the Tetons. The two of us were hosting a forum at a local brewery called theology on tap. It was simply a place for people to come and ask whatever questions they might have about Christianity. And, on this occasion, we had three people who gathered around the table with us—a single woman who went to my friend’s church, her friend who wasn’t a Christian but had begun to attend the church and was asking all kinds of amazing questions, and a retired pastor of a tradition that will remain nameless.

Well, as we began to dig into the questions, the woman with all the good ones asked us how she might hear God speak to her. It was clear she wanted to hear him—that she wanted to know him. So, my friend and I both urged her to read the gospel of John with a caveat or encouragement to pray a simple prayer before each reading that God would speak to her during and through the reading. Then, the retired pastor chimed in with the advice that he often felt spiritually nourished by reading a novel or poem or short story.

Friends, I love fiction and poetry. For heaven’s sake, I was an English teacher before becoming a pastor! But, there’s a foundational difference between such books and the Bible. There is a fundamental difference between what those works claim about themselves and what Scripture claims. As article two of the EFCA statement of faith states:

*We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors.... Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.*⁴

Brothers and sisters, if we are to know God, he must exist. But, furthermore, he must also reveal himself. We can’t know our Creator unless he has spoken to us.

³ See [this](#) article from *EFCA Today*, Summer 2014.

⁴ Read the entire statement of faith [here](#).

If the Lord God hasn't spoken, then we have no hope. We have no authoritative word to guide us, and all meaning in life is merely relative.

It's for this reason that Paul tells us to "hold fast" to the truth—"the teachings we passed on to you" (v. 15)—because it's the very word of God for salvation.

I like the simplicity with which Hudson Taylor—the great English missionary to China—describes the primacy of the Bible. He puts it this way.

*Here are three great truths, 1st, That there is a God; 2nd, That He has spoken to us in the Bible; 3rd, That He means what He says.*⁵

Yes, the Lord God does indeed. Friends, hold fast to the "God-breathed" truths of Scripture, for they teach and train you to be holy and Christlike (2 Timothy 3:16). And, the temptations of Satan will not shake you (Matthew 7:24-25).

3. Live out the truth (vv. 16-17).

When we practice the gospel, we will be fortified against the tempter's plots. We cannot merely believe in the truth. We cannot simply believe and hold fast to it. We must also do it. This is true faith. Look at what Paul prays here.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father ...encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word (vv. 16-17).

How are we to grow stronger? How are we to become steadfast against Satan? How are we to become an unmovable people? It's not by our own power and faith. It's not by knowing more facts about the Bible. It's not by having more fellowship with other believers. These are good things. These are all parts of the Christian life. Yet, they (on their own) will leave us weak and vulnerable.

Look, how silly would I be if I said I was going to run the Chicago Marathon in the fall, but my training was going to consist of eating a strict marathoner's diet, studying the course mile by mile, and chatting a bunch with other marathon runners. That's it. That's all. No actual running! On race day, how likely will I be to make it? Will I persevere? Will I likely withstand the temptation to quit?

If you want encouragement and strength, then follow the Lord Jesus in action. *Practice the gospel!* As you do this, the "Lord Jesus Christ...and God our Father"

⁵ A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century, Book Six: Assault on the Nine*, 322.

will “encourage your hearts and strengthen you” thru all that you do and say (v. 17). God himself will fortify you against the temptations of Satan as you serve his will—as you actively pursue his calling. This is true faith and the increasing of that faith. As the apostle James warns us—a faith without works (without an active obedience) is no faith at all. It’s dead (James 2:17). Friends, *live out the truth!*