

## 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

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[ 0 : 00 ] Christmas is done and dusted. I would imagine that for most of you the tree is in the box. If indeed your tree goes into a box, maybe it gets chopped up and I don't know what happens to your tree. But if it's not in the box and it's meant to be in a box, then you might want to think about getting it into the box quite soon. The tedious matter, maybe that's an unfair word to use, but the tedious matter of giving is over for another year, so we can breathe more easily.

I don't know what you think of giving. Do you like giving? Are you a giving person? I suppose that's not something that we should answer for ourselves. That's really something for others to judge. This evening, I want us to meet the God who keeps on giving. Our God is a God who keeps on giving. Our passage is the same as this morning. If you were able to be here this morning, you'll remember that we were looking at verses 13 and 14 of the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians. And this evening, we will be looking at the verses that follow, verse 15 through to verse 17. As a result, when we describe God as a God who keeps on giving, we do have in mind something of what we were discovering this morning. And as we move on to the following verses, we discover how God keeps on giving. But that expression only makes sense in the light of what we also discovered this morning.

This morning, we were thinking about God's love for us, the manner in which Paul describes the Thessalonians as those loved by the Lord. We spent a little time thinking about that love and describing it as a love from eternity to eternity, from the beginning through to the imminent return of Jesus in glory. We thought of the love of God as a God that decides, a love, sorry, that decides, decides to elect us as His own, a love that provides salvation for us, and a love that shares His glory with us.

And so, in what we were looking at this morning, we have been discovering a God who gives, a giving God. And you might imagine, enough is enough. Surely, can God keep on giving? Well, He does. And we'll appreciate that in what follows, in these verses that follow from verse 15. We're going to order our thoughts with the help of three gifts that we can identify in our text from verse 15 through to verse 17.

Three gifts, three things that God gives us that we find here in the passage. The first thing is that God gives us a challenge. God gives us a challenge. Secondly, God gives us a tradition, or in the language that is used here in verse 15, God gives us teaching, or His teaching. He gives us a challenge. He gives us a tradition.

[ 3 : 25 ] And then thirdly, He gives us the strength. That is, the strength to rise to and meet the challenge that we're going to be thinking about in a moment. Now, as we think about these three verses that we're going to be looking at, verses 15 through to 17, it might appear that verses 16 and 17 are quite distinct from verse 15. But I trust that in due course, we will see why it is that Paul, in verses 16 and 17, we might say interrupts his teaching with a prayer, a prayer in the form of a benediction. So, he is exhorting the Thessalonians, he is teaching them concerning God's love, and then we have this benediction, this prayer there in verses 16 and 17. And it seems, perhaps, if we read the letter superficially, it might seem a little bit out of place. But I hope in due course we'll see, or at least suggest, what is going on here. But back to the three gifts of our God who keeps on giving.

And the first one that we highlighted is this, God gives us a challenge. Verse 15, So then, brothers, stand firm. So then, brothers, stand firm. Here we have a challenge or a gospel imperative. We are commanded by God through the apostle to stand firm. And as is always, the case in the logic and genius of the gospel, a gospel imperative, a command directed to us, is grounded in and flows from gospel indicatives, truths that are presented to us that form the basis for the command that then follows. And so, we have in verse 15 the opening words, so then. And these words, so then, make it clear that the command that is coming, the challenge that will be laid before the Thessalonians is laid in the light of what Paul has been saying to them.

The truths that he has been considering and presenting form the basis for the command that is given, the challenge that is presented to the believers in Thessalonica. In the light of all that God has done, in the light of His eternal love that decides to save, that provides a Savior, that shares in His glory, in the light of all of this, Paul says, so then, stand firm. The call to stand firm is grounded in what God has done for us. Standing firm represents our reasonable and grateful response to God and His goodness to us. But we can say something else as well, that the call to stand firm also reveals the danger that faces us. Paul urges the Thessalonians to stand firm precisely because they were being buffeted from every side and in danger of falling, of not standing firm. Now, in the case of the Thessalonians in this letter, the storm that they were in the midst of was a doctrinal one, but a doctrinal one with ethical consequences. We touched on this very fleetingly this morning. The point of doctrine at issue concerned the day of the Lord, we read, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. This is the problem that Paul is dealing with. This is the storm, the doctrinal storm that the Thessalonians are facing and in the midst of are finding it difficult to stand firm. And so, the call to stand firm is precisely because they are in danger of falling. They are in danger of becoming unsettled or alarmed, to use the language that Paul uses at the beginning of the chapter. Furthermore, a rejection of the apostolic teaching in this matter would, it becomes clear in the rest of the letter, lead to ethical consequences and moral shortcomings. We sometimes imagine that doctrine is something that you can keep in a box, and it has no real impact or influence on moral matters. And if you change your doctrine, it shouldn't really have any consequence on the way you live. But that is something that simply is not. So, what we believe, the doctrine that we hold to, will have necessarily ethical consequences.

Now, in the case of Thessalonica, just to give you one example of that, in the following part of the letter there in chapter 3 of 2 Thessalonians, Paul has to move on to warn the believers there against idleness. We don't need to go into this in detail, but you see a whole section there in chapter 3 that carries that title, it carries that title, Warning Against Idleness. And it seems reasonable to recognize that there is a link between the doctrinal error that was being peddled concerning the day of the Lord and the sin of many of those who were part of that fellowship of being idle. Their wrong doctrine with regard to the coming of the Lord was having an impact on their willingness to work. The idea being, what's the point of working if the day of the Lord has already come? What purpose does it serve?

Now, as I say, we're not going to develop that at all, simply to make the point that doctrinal error does have, sooner or later, ethical or moral consequences.

[10:09] So, here we have this challenge. The challenge is grounded in what God has done for them. It's reasonable for Paul to challenge them to stand firm in the light of God's love and goodness.

But the challenge also reveals that they are in danger, and because they're in danger, it is so important for them to stand firm. But what we still haven't done, even in what we've said thus far, is deal directly with the heart of the matter, what does it mean to stand firm? Or on what or in what are we to stand firm? To pose the question in another way. Well, we are to stand firm in and on the truth, in and on the gospel, in and on the faith, the faith once delivered to the saints. We can fail to stand firm. Our spiritual knees can begin to buckle in different ways. Doctrinal laxity or error and or ethical or moral failure, succumbing to temptation, taking sin lightly, and we could go on, are ways in which we can fail to stand firm. Now, Paul's principal concern on this occasion was doctrinal, though as we've just suggested a moment ago, doctrinal error carried with it ethical consequences.

So, God gives us a challenge, and the challenge is to stand firm. And so, the question that I would pose to myself and I pose to you is, will you stand firm in the faith in this year that has begun?

I don't know what your own circumstances are. I don't know if you are conscious of finding it difficult to stand firm. Maybe you look at the year that has gone, the year that has passed, and you have to recognize and confess, maybe with great sadness, that you didn't stand firm, that you fell, that you were careless in matters of faith. Well, the question at the beginning of this year is, will you stand firm in the faith? Will we, as a church, as a congregation, as a denomination, will we stand firm in the faith in this year that has begun? In the light of who God is, in the light of His great love for us, it is only reasonable that we would, in grateful recognition of all that God has done and does for us, that we would stand firm. So, that's the first thing that God gives us here in this part of the passage. He gives us a challenge, a challenge to stand firm. But I suggested there was a second thing that He gives us, and the second thing that He gives us is He gives us a tradition or traditions, or as it's translated here in verse 15, teachings. In that verse, we are urged to stand firm and hold to the teachings. Now, as you can see at the foot of the page, an alternative and more literal translation of the original would be traditions. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the traditions would be an entirely legitimate translation for the word that is used here. Stand firm and hold to the traditions or the teachings.

Now, when what follows in the verse, it is clear that Paul is indeed referring to his teaching. He goes on to say that very clearly and explicitly. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. So, clearly, he is talking about the teaching that he had given them, be it by word of mouth, face to face as he preached and as he taught to the believers, or by means of a letter. Presumably here, he's thinking specifically of the previous letter that he had written to Thessalonica, though there may have been other letters that they had access to, that contained apostolic teaching. But the point is that it's clear here that Paul is speaking of this gift of God that had been given to them, the believers, of teachings, or apostolic teaching. Why Paul chooses to use this word traditions rather than use another word that would have been literally translated teaching, is intriguing, and we may come back to that in a moment. But the important point is that God gives us traditions or teachings, and their purpose, and this really is where we're going, is precisely to help us stand firm in the faith. See, the challenge is to stand firm in the faith, and then the question is, well, how do I do that? Well, the means that God has given us to help us stand firm in the faith are the teachings that Paul makes reference to there in that same verse. The manner in which we will be able to stand firm is precisely by holding fast to the teachings, to the apostolic teachings, to the Scriptures. Maybe to just visualize this a little or to illustrate it with something more visual. I wonder if in these past months where our little island has been struck by many storms, they don't seem to reach Aberdeen. We've got off very lightly. But in these past months, we know there have been an unusual number of storms and high winds and gales, and we see that in the news reports even in these past few days. Now, I wonder if you've, during that time, you've seen any footage. I can think of one piece of footage in particular that stuck with me of somebody trying to stand firm, to stand upright in the midst of a strong gale. I can have this picture in my mind of this woman on a pavement. I don't know where it was, but she had braced herself in the face of this wind that was howling around her, and she was standing in a posture that would help her to stand firm in the face of these gales. And she did all she could, put all the effort she could to stand firm, but ultimately it wasn't enough, and the wind took her, and she was thrown to the ground and dragged by the wind a number of feet, and it was all very dramatic. Now, imagine if that same woman had been able, in the midst of this storm, to grab hold of a lamppost, something solid and strong, and had grabbed hold of that lamppost. Then you can imagine how she could have avoided that fall.

[ 17 : 27 ] She could have avoided the accident that overtook her in the face of this storm, in the face of this wind, because she was holding on to something that was grounded and that could keep her standing, standing firm in the midst of the storm. Well, that maybe helps us to understand a little of what Paul is saying here when he says, so then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings.

They're not really two separate challenges. There's one challenge, it's to stand firm, but the manner in which we will stand firm is by holding fast, by holding to the teachings that we have been given, that have been passed down to us. We need to stand firm by making use of this gift that we have been given of the teachings. Paul urges the believers to hold fast to the traditions, to the teachings that will serve as a pillar with deep foundations in the midst of every storm.

But let's just think about that a little more by asking the question, well, how do we do that? If we recognize that the challenge is there for us to stand firm, if we recognize that we've been given teaching that will help us to stand firm, how do we make use of that teaching to aid us in standing firm?

Well, there's a few things that I would mention, three things. First of all, we need to know what the traditions are. We need to know what the teachings are. Now, for Paul's readers, I think we can safely say that there would have been little doubt that the Scriptures of the Old Testament form part of the traditions. Indeed, that language of the traditions would perhaps even more quickly have, in their minds, brought them to consider the Scriptures of the Old Testament. But Paul, in writing, almost by the by, makes it clear that his teaching is also to be considered as forming part of the traditions. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions, the teachings, we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. So, Paul's clearly not speaking simply about teaching that he was passing on from the Old Testament Scriptures, though no doubt he did that, but also his own teaching as he, as an apostle, presented to them apostolic teaching. This, too, form part of what Paul considers as the traditions that they are to hold to.

For us today, we have the completed canon of Scripture, the Old and the New Testament, as that which constitutes our traditions and teachings, and we must hold to the Bible. We are, and we're very happy to be known, as a Bible-believing church. Now, there are many churches, and perhaps some who would call themselves Christians, who would be very uncomfortable with such a description.

[ 20 : 44 ] They would cringe at being described as a Bible-believing Christian. Somehow that sounds as if you're just not a very thinking person, not very advanced in recognizing how times have moved on, and, well, there are certain things in the Bible where you can't really hold to with great confidence.

Well, some may be embarrassed, but we know no such embarrassment. We are a Bible-believing church. We hold to the teachings, to the traditions, or at least that is our intention. Perhaps often we don't, as we ought, but certainly we are convinced that that is what we ought to do, to hold to the teachings, to the traditions, to the Bible, to the Scriptures that have been passed on to us. So, in order to hold to the traditions, we need to know what they are. But we also need to have a clear doctrine of Scripture. You see, many might be happy to use the right language to speak about the Bible, and it's not uncommon for us to find that. People will be happy to say, oh, yes, the Bible is God's Word, and we think, well, that's great. That's what we believe. But then when we dig a little deeper, we find that what they mean by that is very different to what we understand by that.

We need to have a clear view of what we do understand by that. We need to have a clear doctrine of Scripture. This is foundational, really, to all of our doctrine. It's interesting that our own confession of faith, the Westminster Confession of Faith, begins with a chapter of the Holy Scriptures.

Chapter 1 of the Holy Scriptures. Now, why does it do that? Why do the Westminster Divines begin the confession of faith with a chapter on the Holy Scriptures? Why not begin with the doctrine of God?

That might seem the place to begin, or of salvation, of Jesus Christ. Well, for the simple reason that we would not have a doctrine of God, we could not have a doctrine of salvation without the Scriptures.

[ 22 : 47 ] And so, reasonably, in what is, we recognize a man-made infallible document, but nonetheless, very reasonably, they begin with the Holy Scriptures. And indeed, there, in a few choice words, we have a very helpful summary of what we believe concerning the Scriptures. We're not going to go through that now or even read that now, but perhaps in summary, we can say that we believe the Bible, the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament, to be inspired by God and consequently infallible, or without error in all that they affirm. So, we need to know what the traditions are. We need to have a doctrine of Scripture, but also, and this may seem very obvious, but it's worth making the point, we need to know the Scriptures. Little is to be gained by having a sound doctrine of Scripture if we are ignorant of the Scriptures. We can't hold on to that which we do not know, and we can't know without diligent study on the Scriptures. We need to listen carefully to the Bible as it is taught and preached. We need to make use of the opportunities that are given for us to study the Bible with other Christians, where we can learn from one another. We need to spend time on our own in personal reading of the Bible. We can make use of the many helpful books that can help us to better understand the Bible without ever replacing, of course, the Bible as our principal concern and object of study, if we can call it that. If the teachings are to help us to stand firm, then they will do so in the measure that we know them. And so, that is, if you wish, part of the challenge. So, we are given by

God a challenge. We're given teachings that will help us face the challenge, but then finally, God gives us the strength. At this point in the letter, there is what might appear to be an unexpected interruption in the flow of what Paul is saying. There in verses 13 and 14, we were thinking about this morning, Paul presents this wonderful teaching on the love of God and all that God has done for us.

There follows very reasonably the challenge, so then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings. We passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. And then we have this, I'm calling it an interruption, where Paul prays. In the middle of his teaching, he prays, a little bit like if I was preaching this sermon, and in the middle of preaching the sermon, I just stopped and prayed.

Nothing wrong if I were to do that, but I think you'd find it unusual, not something we would ordinarily do. So, here Paul is teaching, and then he stops for a moment. He doesn't even stop. He just, in full flow, he begins to pray in writing, but he prays. The prayer takes the form of a benediction.

Now, we're accustomed to finding benedictions maybe at the end of a letter, where we would expect perhaps to find something like we have here in verses 16 and 17. But why here? Why at this point?

[ 26 : 11 ] I think the answer to that is a simple enough answer, and I hope also a revealing answer. Paul, even as he urges the Thessalonians to stand firm in the faith, is conscious that they need help to do so, more help. His magistral exposition of the love of God, the apostolic teaching he has faithfully delivered, will not be sufficient. So, what does he do? He prays to the God who keeps on giving, asking that he would grant to the Thessalonians the strength required to stand firm. And so, he prays for them. He prays that they would have the strength that they need, that in the midst of the storm, in the midst of all their troubles, in the midst of all the pressures that they're under, being pulled in one direction or another, that God would strengthen them.

Seemingly, they have everything they need. They have the apostolic teaching, Paul himself as their teacher. And yet, Paul, knowing who they are and what they're like, and we're all like them, weak and frail and vulnerable, what does he do? He stops, and he prays that God would give them the strength that they need. But we can just briefly note the elements of Paul's prayer on their behalf, this benediction. Who is it directed to? Well, what do we read? May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father. It's interesting to compare this prayer in the form of a benediction with another similar prayer in the previous letter that Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians chapter 3 and from verse 11.

We have a prayer that is similar in some regards, though not identical by any means. There in verse 11 of chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians, we read, Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Now, our concern this evening is not to think about the content of this, but in considering to whom the prayer is directed, it is interesting just to contrast how in 2 Thessalonians, the prayer is directed in this way, begins in this way, May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father. And in the first letter, the order is reversed.

[ 28 : 54 ] Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus. And Paul goes on. Why is this significant? Is it significant? Well, let me just suggest this, that in swapping the order in these two occasions, and I imagine inadvertently, certainly perhaps inadvertently, what Paul does is reveal his convictions concerning the shared and equal divinity of the Father and the Son. Both enjoy the same power and prerogative to answer the prayers of God's people. And so, even in this way, as he does in a number of ways in these letters, not that it is his primary concern, but he provides a growing body of evidence that leads us to our conclusions regarding the divinity of Christ and indeed the doctrine of the Trinity itself. The prayer is directed to our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father. But what the prayer also does is recognize and give thanks for what we might call God's track record in giving. In asking for help, Paul is doing so in the confidence of one who knows that God has already proved his love and his giving character, his grace. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope.

This is what God has already done. God has a track record of giving to his people, of strengthening his people, of encouraging his people. That is what God does. And so, as Paul prays to God, and we'll notice in a moment what it is he asks on behalf of the Thessalonians, he asks these things in the confidence of one who knows that God who knows that God has, as we're calling it, a track record of giving, of strengthening, of encouraging. And this track record constitutes the ground of Paul's confidence for the petition that follows. And what is the petition? Well, we have that in verse 17, encourage your hearts and strengthen you to stand firm and to hold fast. To stand firm and to hold fast is not to be understood as a purely defensive posture. Maybe the picture that I gave of the woman trying to stand firm in the midst of the gale, very defensive. Her only concern was simply not to fall down. And maybe that could be a little bit misleading, because in the prayer that Paul prays here, he's concerned for much more than simply defensively withstanding error and attack, but rather that as they stand firm, they would do so, living lives characterized by and overflowing with every good deed and word.

Yes, that their hearts would be encouraged in the midst of attack and challenge and discouragement, in the midst of seeing others falling away, but that also as part of this task that they've been given to stand firm, that they would be strengthened in every good deed and word. Well, we would do well to pray this prayer for ourselves and for each other as we look at the year that has begun and what remains for us. That we would, as we are concerned for one another and seek to encourage and help one another grow in grace and stand firm in the faith, with Paul, pray this for ourselves and for each other.

We have then a God who keeps on giving. He gives us a challenge to stand firm in the faith. He gives us the traditions, His word to which we must hold that we might stand firm, and He gives us the strength to stand firm and flourish in the faith in response to prayer, seeking such help, and we thank Him for this.

Let us pray. Our Lord God, we do indeed thank You that You are the God who keeps on giving. We thank You that You do challenge us, that You are concerned for us, that You save us with this great purpose, that we would grow and mature, that we would stand firm in the faith. We thank You for the traditions, for the teachings, for the Word of God, and we pray that You would help us to hold to Your Word, that we would indeed be a people of the book, that we would know the Bible, that we would study the Bible, that we would have a clear understanding of what the Bible is and the place that it ought to occupy in our lives and in our church. And we thank You that You are the God who, though You have given us so much and might reasonably conclude, well, what more could I possibly do? Yet You are a God who does more, and You hear and You answer the prayers of Your people as we pray for strength in the midst of trouble for ourselves and for one another. We pray that we would do that, that we would be quick to turn to You, seeking Your help, that we might stand firm in the faith. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[ 34 : 34 ] Well, let's sing as we draw our service to a close this evening, and we'll sing from Psalm 46 on page 59 of our psalm books and sing psalms, page 59, Psalm 46a, and we'll sing verses 1 to 7.

This is a psalm that celebrates and testifies to the fact that with God as our refuge and our strength, we can stand firm in the midst of storms of different kinds. Psalm 46a, verses 1 to 7, we'll sing to the tune Stroudwater. God is our refuge and our strength, our ever-present aid, and therefore, though the earth gives way, we will not be afraid. Verses 1 to 7, and we'll stand to sing.

God is our refuge and our strength, our ever-present aid, and therefore, though the earth gives way, we will not be afraid.

God is our refuge and our strength, our ever-present aid, the mountains fall into the sea,  
The waters fall and roar We will not fear The mountains quake As they take down the  
shore A river flows through streams delight The city of our God

The holy place in which the Lord The star and the saints are low God is within his holy  
place The city will not yield For God will come That rain of day To be their help and shield  
The nations are in disarray

[ 38 : 09 ] The great does disappear God's peace The dark is mighty wise That all earth falls within  
The Lord Almighty is with us To strengthen and sustain For Jesus' Lord Our strong  
defense And fortress will remain

Now may the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with us all now and always. Amen. God blessing you Claudio The fellow and the saints  
For so Això-O■ God blessing you The national line For so millones For us Searching the  
water Why you not From us The climate From us To us To our