

Date of sermon: 7/3/2021
Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
Bible passage or verse: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17
Title of Sermon: Anchored by Our Love
Series: Living in the Light of His Coming - #3

¹³But 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. ¹⁴He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So 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. ¹⁶May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

And turn to 2 Thessalonians, in the second chapter, where we continue tonight in this series of Living in the Light of Christ's Coming. Remember, Paul had talked with them about their losing their minds. They were filled with fear; they thought they had missed the return of Christ, and Paul said, "You know it hasn't happened, because two things haven't occurred -- the great apostasy -- or rebellion -- has not occurred, and also, the man of lawlessness has not been revealed. But much like Jesus' teaching, they were filled with great panic. A lot of what you see today -- speculation about everything, the vaccine surely is the mark of the Beast; they're preparing us in all of the things. And thus, Paul writes to us. And the question that we wrestle with today is, how do we stabilize ourselves? We know what hasn't occurred, so be at peace. But as this time comes, and the panic rises, and the apostasy and the church declines across the world -- and it will. And you go to church with far fewer than you've ever been -- and if you're a person who needs size, brace yourself, because it will be a remnant, Jesus says. How is it that you stand?

Paul writes to them in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, starting in verse 13: "But we ought always to thank God for you, dear brothers who are loved by God, because from the very beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm. Hold on to the teachings that we pass on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. And may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, may He encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word."

Lord Jesus, we love you. Your word is precious to us. It is the truth. It is that which is good and right and lovely and of good repute, and because of that, we submit our hearts to it because we know that it will teach us, reprove us, and correct us, and train us in righteousness for the events ahead and for every good work, as Paul talked about. And for that, we submit. In Christ's name, Amen.

When the end occurs, and the birth pangs are coming, it will be a season, depending on the timeline, that there will be an awakening in the nation of Israel -- Paul promises that in Romans. But it will also be a time, Jesus said, of great apostasy. There will be many, he says, whose hearts grow cold. And I don't know about you, but periodically, I look at those thoughts and I say, "Dear God, not mine." And that's not a statement of my confidence -- that's a prayer. "Dear God, let it not be mine." How do we make it? Paul says, "I want you to hold tight." Last week -- to the truth. This week -- to God's love. Hold tight. Hold tight. It's gonna be rough. It's gonna be hard. People today say, "When are we gonna get back to normal?" Don't think we're going back to normal. I'm not a pessimist at all -- I just don't think we're going back to normal. I don't think we're going back to Mayberry RFD. I don't think we're going back to a time where, as one person said, "Men are men and women are women and we were proud of it," and everything else. We're not going back! We're not! We're here. We're moving forward. The axis has shifted. And by the way, it's not just in the US. If you're reading anywhere of the world, that the whole axis has shifted in the entire world. The disregard of truth, anti-law, speculations -- it's worldwide. Want to

read an interesting book by Voddie Baucham called *Fault Lines*, and it will help you gain a perspective of a brother who was raised in the projects and schooled in Texas and now lives in Zambia, and has a perspective far different than you're probably going to get on Fox and CNN. It will be refreshing -- and yes, terribly sobering. And in that moment, Paul is writing to this church, who are frightened beyond imagination, and he tells us what he told them -- "My friends, when you face the end, realize -- everyone needs encouragement." They do. Everyone is going to need encouragement. The entire passage here is, "Stand firm, hold on, may the God of hope be with you!" Why would he say that? Because they were wondering. They're faltering. Their knees are wobbling.

Everyone needs encouragement. There's not a person on this earth. And the second you presume that you think somebody doesn't need encouragement -- "Oh, they're doing fine" -- trust me, if they're human, if they're breathing, they need to be encouraged. That includes you, and that includes the person sitting next to you. It's kind of like, I think, Paul was writing as a father. He actually says that in the Thessalonians. "We loved you like a mother, we loved you like a father." That's how Paul saw people. I was just finishing up reading Romans yesterday and came to chapter 16. I love the end. Paul says, "Greet my dear," and "Tell my precious," and -- he goes through this list. It's a marvelous list! And Paul had such a father's heart for people, but he understood they needed encouragement. Why? Because the pressures that they are facing are significant. It's like a dad who is praying for his children. It's like a mom who is yearning for their success. And he tells them -- "Dear friends, I know you're under pressure. I want to encourage you."

Are people under pressure today? Oh, absolutely. Sixty percent of young people ages 18 to 24 -- and these are a couple of years old, so imagine what they would be like today. Sixty percent of young people today, ages 18 to 24, have felt so stressed by pressure to succeed that they have felt overwhelmed or unable to cope. Given the fact that I serve on a board of a university, the incoming classes, freshmen next year, are skyrocketing downward across the board at universities. Why? It's not that they don't want to be educated -- it's that they don't want to leave home. They're afraid to go out. They're afraid of the world that's out there. They're under such pressure they want to stay home. They've decided to do life online. Sixty percent of them feel so stressed by the pressure to succeed. Fifty-seven percent of young people today have felt so stressed because of the fear of making a mistake that they have felt unable to cope. We have more test anxieties than we've ever seen. The inability to take a test. The need to vary the test. Why? Because at the end of the day, the idea of failing is so traumatizing that it leads to the last one that I will give you. Thirty-nine percent -- literally, 39 percent -- one in three young people have experienced suicidal ideation. What is that? It means they think about it, it means they plan it, it means they imagine the effect of it, it means they think about their future, and the idea of death is more compelling and pleasurable, if you will, to them than the idea of living life.

Now, if you've ever been there, you know. You know the darkness of that cloud and you know the challenge of taking air. If you've never been there, you can't imagine it. You really can't imagine life would be so hard. But it is. And that's what Paul is writing to. He's writing to a group of people who he said earlier in this chapter were losing their mind -- they were out of their wits. They'd lost their marbles. And my friend, when you run into that person, you don't condemn them -- you understand they need encouragement. How do you do it? Paul says, "I want you to soak up. I want you to soak up the love of the Father." Multiple times in these few verses, he says, "I want to thank God for you, brothers loved by God. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our father, who loved us." What's he trying to get home? Do you understand that you're loved by God? As Max Lucado so wonderfully put it -- if God had a refrigerator, your face would be on it. He loves you. He adores you. He thinks about you. His Son Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and He prays for you every day. The Holy Spirit is praying for you. There's nothing that people tell me in this church that encourages me more -- "Pastor, we pray for you daily." I cannot tell you what that means to me. Words escape me. When I was 30 years of age, I thought, -- "Huh, that's nice. Thank you." When I was 40 years of age, I was like, "Well, that's an obligatory -- well, that's really nice." When I'm 59 years of age, I breathe because of that. But imagine that the Son is at the right hand of the Father every day interceding for you. Thinking about you. Strategizing for you. Planning your future. Thinking about your impact.

As we looked at it last week, God's love is, number one, intentional. It is. He doesn't sit back and say, "I love you if you love me. I'll love you when you love me. I'll love you if you behave well. I will love you if you perform well. I will love you if you use the gifts that I've given to you." Oh, no -- when I was a sinner, Christ died for me. When I am unfaithful, Christ is faithful to me. He cannot be unfaithful. Why? Because Christ is in me. When I have a bad day, Jesus is there interceding for me. When I mess up, the Holy Spirit is saying, "Father, let's keep working. I know this boy is having a bad day! But you know, your Son died for Him and you love him, and I just wanted to remind you." Yes. God's love is intentional and it is eternal. It doesn't stop, it doesn't have limits. And it's transformational. God's love is that way. He sees things in you that the average person doesn't see. He sees things in you that you don't see.

Joyce Dougherty one time took a trip, and she went to Donetsk, Ukraine. Seminary that I taught at for 20 years -- we had a relationship with a school there, and so, we had an ongoing, wonderful relationship. And Joyce, one day, she went there and she went to one of the orphanages there. And this was an orphanage that specialized in deformity. When Joyce made her way through, she encountered a friend -- Nancy Stanberry -- and Nancy said to Joyce, "Joyce, I am showing you the unlovables. That's what Ukraine speaks about to these kids. They're unlovable and they're unadoptable." When she walked in -- when Joyce walked in, she lased in on the eyes of young Kristin. Kristin was just -- well, she was young. She was two years of age. And when everybody else saw the facial tumor that altered her entire face, Joyce saw Kristin's eyes. She couldn't get her eyes off of them. And Joyce said, "I want her." Nancy was shocked. Nancy was speechless. She said, "I don't -- uh -- you have to understand. I don't hear these words. No one wants our children. You know if you take her, you're going to have a lifetime of surgeries." And Joyce looked at her, "But I see in her eyes my child." You see, there was a day that Jesus looked at my deformed heart, and He looked at yours, and it was writhing with sin. And it was a sin that affected every aspect of my life. In fact, it so affected my life that people really couldn't see me because sin had twisted it so much, much like Kristin. But somehow Joyce had an ability -- I think it was given by God -- and when she looked at Kristin, she didn't see the facial tumor. It's not that she couldn't describe it, not that she didn't see it -- it's just not what grabbed her attention. What grabbed her attention in that moment was Kristin's eyes. And what grabbed the Father's heart with you was you. And Paul understands that, my friends, if you don't understand the love of the Father, you're forever going to be living like an orphan. Wondering if you have a home, believing that all of life is contractual and the reality is that you're really in this alone.

Twice, Paul says -- "May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ himself and the God of our Father who loved us, may He encourage your heart." Everyone needs to be encouraged, and Paul says, "I want you to soak up the love of the Father." The most important person who has ever lived on this earth, in my opinion, was Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ every day had a habit, Mark tells us. He would leave His disciples -- in fact, frequently the disciples would get up in the morning, and they'd go around trying to find Jesus, and -- "Jesus, where were you?" "Oh, I was out spending time with the Father." "Who?" "I was out talking to the Father." "What do you say to Him every day?" And I can almost hear Jesus saying, "It's not so much what I say to Him -- it's what He says to me." What was it? Daily, Jesus heard the Father speak, "You are my beloved Son. I love you. You are my beloved Son -- I'm so proud of you. You are my beloved Son. We're gonna have a great day. You are my beloved Son -- I loved when you went into Samaria! That was a good one! You are my beloved Son. When you said those Pharisees were a bunch of white-washed sepulchrs, I wanted to applaud from Heaven!" I don't know about this conversation, but I at least can dream it up in my own life. You see, I think they had a conversation, and I think the Father spoke to the Son. How do I know that? Because the Son said, "I've only come to speak that which the Father has given to me." Daily He heard the Father speak of His love. Daily, He was reminded that He was not alone. Daily He was affirmed for who He was, not what He did. Daily He was told how much the Father loved Him.

Now, one makes the statement that if you don't walk the cyclical journey of Jesus, you will be malnourished. What was it? He moved from solitude where He heard from the Father who He was, and He moved into community with His disciples, who was His team, which, there He moved into ministry. And here's His point. If you don't hear from the Father who you are, you will demand that the community tell you how important you are. You see, my friend, if you don't hear from the Father who you are, you will

make your wife responsible to uphold you, to build you up, to encourage you, and to tell you you're doing fine. If you don't know, as Jesus did, that you're the beloved of the Father, you will demand everybody else to fill that vacuum, and you will forever be living in fear of them, and in demand of them, that they behave. Encourage people to soak up the love of the Father, and encourage people by celebrating them.

I love how Paul does this. I love how Paul does this -- how does he do it? He tells them so many things. "You're chosen." Folks, you are chosen by God. You are transformed in Christ. You are going to have your work established by God. I want to celebrate every step of the way. You're the firstfruits, you Thessalonians. You're gonna be the wavemakers. You're gonna be the model setters for everyone else that's gonna come along. And I've got news for you -- God is going to use you. He's going to encourage your hearts, He's going to strengthen you in every good deed and word." Learn to celebrate them. I think people grow best, actually, in a context of affirmation and celebration. Oh, there's time for correction -- we'll get to that in a minute. But the reality is that it enables me when I am celebrating a person, when I am encouraging a person, it gives me the ability, the inner strength needed to face what is not right in my life. You see, Paul -- Jesus -- he did that with all of his disciples. "Peter -- you're my rock. I'm gonna build the church on people like you. And the gates of Hell are never gonna take it down." I don't know about you, but that's one of the most amazing periods to me of how Jesus mentored Peter, because Peter had just failed Jesus at an epic level. Epic. And Jesus comes to this poor fisherman who was getting ready to walk away from three years of ministry and everything that he did with Jesus, and he was gonna go back to fishing. Why? Because it's the only thing he knew how to do with success. And Jesus comes to him and says, "Peter, I'm gonna build my church on people like you. The confession that you have -- we're gonna change the world together. We're gonna change the world, Peter."

My friends, when you have somebody who believes in you that deeply, and you discover that it's God, and you discover that it's the body of Christ -- just like Paul was to these friends -- it's almost like you can say to Satan, "I dare you to bring on whatever you want, because we're invincible in the grace of Christ." Learn to celebrate people. Learn to discover that which they don't even believe in themselves, which will allow you to challenge them. You'll need to do that -- and Paul did that. How did he do that? He says in verse 13, "But we always thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because, from the beginning John chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the spirit through belief in the truth, and he called you to this through our gospel. So then brothers, stand firm. By word or mouth. And you who are -- what? The firstfruits." I like firstfruits. I went cherry picking today. I have a tree in the backyard. Real cherries, there's really nothing better. Maraschino cherries should be illegal. It is a defamation of something so glorious that I can't imagine that we allow it. But when I was picking these cherries, they were right on the edge -- many were ready to be selected, but oh, their friends were not quite ready. But I knew they're coming. And behind these firstfruits, which filled the bucket, are going to be second fruits and third fruits -- if I can get rid of the crows -- and they will fill multiple buckets! Why? Because I know that the firstfruits are a picture of what is to come. Now, imagine what Paul is saying to them. "Dear friends, there's gonna be people who come behind you, and they're gonna run the race because you ran it so well. They're gonna endure the race because you endured it. They're gonna be faithful because you're faithful. They're gonna learn how to pray because you taught them how to pray. They're gonna hold onto the gospel -- why? Because they watched you." Can you imagine a more glorious, uplifting, and yet challenging statement to tell a person? "You're my lead-off hitter. And there's gonna be a whole slough of people who are gonna watch you." And it's not so much don't mess up. It's this -- understand the weight of your impact. Understand the need of the honor of your life. Understand the power of your own personal righteousness. Understand the strength of your prayers. You see, when we get into a difficult time, so often we say, "I'm so sorry." Quit saying you're sorry! Tell them, "Buck up! God made you for this day!" God made us for this season!

I had a good friend who lives in Texas. And he called me the other day, and he goes, "Hey, you know, I'll tell you what -- I hear it's getting kinda rough out there in Oregon. You want to move to Texas?" And I said, "Are you kidding me? Did Daniel want to leave Babylon? Did Jeremiah want to leave his post? You want me to sin and go down to a pathetic state by the name of Texas and leave this glorious battle? What kind of sick individual are you?" Conversation was pretty short. The reality is, my friends, when

we're facing difficult times -- and we are -- challenge people, not with what they have, but challenge them, "Oh, may God Himself, the God of our Father who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, may he encourage your hearts. Run the race well. Run it well." And maybe, encourage people by letting them know, "I'm gonna clear the way for you." I'm gonna clear the way for you. How does Paul do that? He finishes this little section with what sometimes people call a blessing. I think it's really important for you to bless people. I do. I think it's important. Make it a part of your life. What is it? It is speaking on behalf or for another person a prayer of God's blessing upon them. Let's read it together. It's right here. "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our father who loved us, and by his grace give us eternal encouragement and good hope encourage your hearts, strengthen you in every good deed and in word."

There are people who have mentored me. Dr. Robinson has -- he's in Heaven, he was an unbelievably good friend. He opened doors for me that I probably could not have opened by myself. He cleared the way. Dr. Lewis -- brilliant mind. He opened a door for me to teach that allowed me to teach for over 20 years at Denver and Fuller and others, simply because he pushed that door open. I would imagine every one of us in this room have had people who have cleared the way for us. They've opened a door. They made a phone call. They helped us get a job. You can cynically call that the Good Ol' Boys' Network, or you can say, that's probably part of a good life is to have people who love you enough to look out for you and to help open a door for you. That's nothing compared to what Paul is doing for his friends. But he's clearing the way. He's praying, and he's asking God to establish their lives. He's asking God to encourage their hearts. He's asking God to strengthen their life. He's asking God to give them good hope. He's asking God to affirm his love for them. He's clearing the way of all the obstacles and all the despondency, and he's trying to get rid of the fog of despair, and he's trying to eliminate the idea that the future is going to be a bleak place. He's clearing all of the obstacles that Satan wants to put in front of us so that when we run, we can run well and fast and fierce.

If you want to encourage a person, understand that people will stand better when you stand with them. They will. That's why we need the body of Christ. It may be 2000 years old, but it's not a bad tradition. We need the body of Christ. Why? Because something happens. We get to encourage and challenge and open the way through blessing. We get to look into people's eyes and we get to see the beauty of their life when the rest of the world sees the deformity of their heart. We get to see the power of what they're going to be rather than the disappointment of their failed decision of yesterday. People will stand better when you stand with them. Everyone needs encouragement. They do. When this life gets more difficult -- and it will. And when we discover that normal is probably not going to be experienced again, and the birth pangs as we move closer to the glorious return of Christ -- when that happens, and the apostasy begins to rack up, you will stand. You will not only stand yourself, but you will help others stand because you will discover that people stand better when you stand with them.

Copyright by First Baptist Church, Salem OR (July 3, 2021). Please do not copy without written permission of the copyright holder.