STAND FIRM AND HOLD FAST

2 Thessalonians 2:1–17

Key Verse: 2:15

“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.”

How do you deal with pressure? Under pressure some people buckle easily; others escape; still others seem unmoved, for whatever reason. For all of us, life is full of pressures. As Christians we face pressures that challenge our faith, especially in our pluralistic and deceptive world. They come both from without and from within. Some think that those who stand firm are too rigid, not flexible, out of date, even out of touch. What is our faith? How can we stand firm and hold fast to it? And why should we? In today’s passage Apostle Paul tells us. As we meditate on these words, may God himself speak to our hearts today.

Look at verses 1,2. According to these verses, the Thessalonians were being told that the day of the Lord had already come. What is “the day of the Lord”? It’s the day when Jesus comes back (Ac1:11; cf. 1Co1:8). Many Old Testament prophets spoke about the coming “day of the Lord.” It’s also known as Judgment Day, when God will reward his people and punish the wicked. All their prophecies pointed to the Second Coming of Jesus. Our Lord Jesus himself taught his disciples about it (Mt24; Mk13; Lk21; Jn14:2,3). His coming won’t be secretive; it’ll be obvious to everyone. The Second Coming of Jesus is still God’s promise. We believe Jesus will come again in glory to bring God’s judgment and to save all those who trusted in him. The Thessalonians already heard about it. 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 reads, “According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” And 2 Thessalonians 1:7b–10a reads, “This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.”

But look at verse 2 again. Some were asserting, in the name of the apostles, that the day of the Lord had already come. It doesn’t say why. But their basic motive was to get these new believers to give up on their new Christian faith. Paul tells the Thessalonians not to be “easily unsettled or alarmed.” In verse 3a he writes, “Do not let anyone deceive you in any way…” In fact, our Lord Jesus himself said, “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many…and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people…For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Mt24:4,5,11,24). Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:1, “The Spirit clearly says that later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” Since it is mentioned so many times, we should take this warning about being deceived seriously.

Why do people get deceived? Partly it’s when we’re naïve and pressured by forces around us. But mainly it’s because we get dragged away and enticed by our own evil desires (Jas1:14). Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:3, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” We all would rather follow our own desires rather than the truth. But we need to accept God’s truth, even when it challenges us.

Paul goes on to tell them clearly what must happen before Jesus comes. Read verse 3b. Two things are mentioned here. First, “the rebellion occurs.” Second, “the man of lawlessness is revealed.” What is “the rebellion”? The Greek word is “apostasia,” from which we get our word “apostasy.” So the rebellion seems to include when many so called Christians turn away or abandon the faith. But it also refers to a world-wide rebellion against God. Ever since Adam sinned the world has been living in rebellion against God. But just before Jesus comes again, this rebellion will intensify. Our Lord Jesus warned us, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold” (Mt24:12). In Greek it literally says, “Because of the increase of lawlessness.”

So who is this “man of lawlessness”? Read verse 4. The word “lawlessness” can also be translated as “sin” or “wickedness.” It’s a reference to what the prophet Daniel predicted as “the abomination that causes desolation” (Da9:27; 11:31; 12:11) and what our Lord Jesus also warned about (Mt24:15,16; Mk13:14; Lk21:20,21). The abomination is that this person sets himself in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God and attacking anything and anyone who says otherwise (cf. Da11:36,37). Such a person’s coming was also predicted by the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel (Isa14:13,14; Eze28:2). In the Book of Revelation, he’s called “the beast” (Rev13:4–6). The Apostle John calls him “the antichrist” (1Jn2:18). He also says there is “the spirit of the antichrist” already in the world (1Jn4:3). In 2 Thessalonians 2 Apostle Paul repeatedly says that this “man of lawlessness” is one day going to be “revealed” (3,6,8). We don’t know exactly who he is, but one day it’s going to become very clear. He’s going to lead the world-wide rebellion against God.

When he was first in Thessalonica, Apostle Paul had already taught the new believers about this (5), so now he’s reminding them again. Look at verses 6,7. These are said to be the most difficult to understand verses Apostle Paul ever wrote. It’s not exactly clear what he means; he may have told them in person, but he doesn’t explain it all here. But what is clear is this: the man of lawlessness is currently “being held back.” It’s repeated twice. The secret power of lawlessness is already at work, Paul says. But it’s being held back or restrained. The point is not who or what is doing it, but that it’s being held back. But the power of lawlessness, the power of sin, the power of wickedness in the world, will increase dramatically when the man of lawlessness is revealed. All restraints will be thrown aside when people embrace the man of lawlessness as God. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold” (Mt24:12). It points to a most scary time. When we see this dramatic increase of wickedness led by someone claiming to be God, we know that Jesus will be coming back at any moment.

Should we be afraid? No! Read verse 8. This too, fulfills prophecies. Isaiah 11:4b says, “He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” Though the man of lawlessness will seem so powerful, he will be slain and defeated with just a word from Jesus. The Bible says he will be thrown to everlasting destruction (3b; Rev19:20; 20:10).

Even so, Paul warns us of how he will gain influence over people. Read verses 9,10a. He will deceive people in two ways: first, through signs and wonders he performs, and second, through wickedness. When there are displays of power people easily can be deceived. But what may be even more deceptive is wickedness. In Greek it literally says “deceitful injustice.” People would like to think they can get away with injustice of various kinds; that’s why it’s so deceitful. And for the time being, people can commit all kinds of sins and wickedness and there can seem to be no consequences. Why do people get deceived by wickedness? Read verse 10. It says “they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” Deception starts with what we love. If we love the truth, it’s our way out of deception. If we love the truth, we can see through whatever is false. If we love the truth we can be saved. Paul gives us another perspective on this. Read verses 11,12. People being deceived by the man of lawlessness is a form of God’s punishment on them. Here, “the lie” is his declaration that he is God. God allows people to believe such a flagrant lie because they did not believe the truth but delighted in wickedness (12b). We need to love the truth and believe it.

Read verse 13. In contrast, the Thessalonians were so precious. They were loved by the Lord. They were chosen as firstfruits of the gospel. They were being saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. Being sanctified in a world full of sin and lawlessness and wickedness can seem impossible. But it is something the Holy Spirit does in us as we believe and love the truth. Read verse 14. The Thessalonian believers would even share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. This glory is promised to all who believe in Jesus and follow him in this world. Paul wasn’t overwhelmed by the power of lawlessness that would overwhelm many; he believed God’s work in his people would prevail and win a great victory. Read verse 15. This is Paul’s conclusion. We need to stand firm and hold fast to the teachings passed on to us about our Lord Jesus, especially his Second Coming. Even though most people don’t really believe he’s coming again, we should believe it. And we should keep on believing, even when there’s great pressure to give in to wickedness and compromise our faith—even when the pressure comes from former loved ones who end up betraying and hating us. Our Lord Jesus taught the same thing. He said in Matthew 24:12, “…but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (cf. Mk13:13; Lk21:19).

So what does it mean to “stand firm” and “hold fast,” and how can we? Paul writes, “to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (15b). We need to stand firm and hold fast to God’s word. When we become lazy about studying the Bible, we can lose a grip on our faith. But when we devote ourselves to meditating on his word, our faith can burn brightly. Moreover, it means to stand firm in our love for Jesus. In the Book of Revelation Jesus rebukes one of the seven churches for forsaking their “first love” (Rev2:4). He rebukes another church for being neither hot nor cold (Rev3:15,16). To stand firm, we need to repent of our love of the world and the things of the world (1Jn2:15–17). To stand firm, we need to love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love (Eph6:24). It’s so easy to give in to the pressure to conform, to be like others. It’s so easy to give in to our own desires. It’s so easy to get discouraged, or apathetic, or afraid. To stand firm and hold fast, we really need God’s help. Read verses 16,17. We need the encouragement and strength that come from the Lord Jesus Christ himself and from God our Father. We need to remember his great love and his amazing grace. We need to remember the eternal encouragement and good hope of the kingdom he promised to bring us to. Paul prays that he may encourage our hearts and strengthen us “in every good deed and word.” It means that to stand firm and hold fast, we need to actively be practicing our faith, sharing the word of God and doing good deeds for his glory.

Read verse 15 again. May God give us the living hope of the Second Coming of Jesus, and help us to stand firm and hold fast to it in our daily lives.