

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once told this parable:

A crowded theater hosted a variety show, with various acts in it. Each act was more fantastic than the one prior, so it created louder and louder applause from the audience. Suddenly, a clown rushed on to the stage and said, "I apologize for this interruption, but I regret to inform you that our theater is on fire! You need to leave right away, and in an orderly fashion."

But the audience thought he was part of the act, so they laughed and applauded. They thought he was very committed to the role. But the clown again implored them that they needed to leave right away or they would get seriously injured, maybe even die. And again, they greeted him with loud and thunderous applause. At last, he could do no more, and so he left the building, and the people were destroyed.

And Kierkegaard concludes in this sobering way: "Our age will go down in fiery destruction not to the sound of mourning but to applause and cheering."

... [P A U S E] ...

Soren Kierkegaard died in 1855 ! And what he said about THAT generation seems all the truer of our own age. Our age seems to be going down into fiery destruction with applause and cheering. ... I get the impression (after talking with many of you)... that you are somewhat like me. I can't watch very much of the news anymore... like I used to. It unsettles me. It disturbs me greatly. ... All that seems right is being turned upside down!

I received a phone call this week from my close friend... Surjit Rhandawa. He called from Colorado... just after he heard a news report that Oregon has passed a new law that teachers can no longer demand a single right

answer to math questions. (2 + 2 must equal whatever the student wants it to be!) ... **[P A U S E]** ...

He called because he wanted to discuss where he sees that our society is headed. His understanding is that a demonic ploy is underway... challenging the most stable foundations of our society... (I mean... without the certainty that 2 + 2 must ALWAYS equal 4... how can society continue to function...?) ... This... and all of the recent challenges (all over the world) to what is true and right... are making societies so off-balance... that they will be very ready for a world leader... who will attempt to re-define all truth. *“Ahhh! Stability... once again!”*

Whether or not my friend is correct... our world is definitely being rocked. Foundations beneath our feet are shaking and crumbling. ... Freedom of speech is in rapid decline... and Biblical truth is being distorted and attacked. Disturbing forms of persecution against Christians surround us... (more – each and every day)... and we know that it will only get worse. ... This is why we need today’s passage of Scripture in 2 Thessalonians. It could hardly come at a better time!

Have we entered the time that the Bible calls the tribulation...?

The believers to whom Paul wrote the letter we are studying (2nd Thessalonians) had also been shaken and were being persecuted. They wondered the same thing... because some false teaching arose that rattled them... (*as if their persecution was not enough.*) ... Someone (apparently claiming to be the Apostle Paul... or having his same authority) convinced many of these believers that Jesus had returned... they got left behind...

and now they were living in the tribulation. ... And so Paul wrote what we looked at the last time I was in this pulpit...

2 Thes. 2:1-4

Our passage (the last time we were together) taught us that they could not be in the tribulation – because a massive turning away from correct doctrine will FIRST occur... and it will reach it's peak when the antichrist is revealed. They were not in the tribulation because that had not happened... and neither are we in the Tribulation... because all of the rebellion that we see today has not yet reached it's peak through the world-wide leadership of antichrist.

OK... that question being settled... that Jesus had not already come... and He did not leave them in the tribulation... Paul sought to restore their sense of stability (which they had lost by their shaky world... and persecution.) ... In the second part of the passage that we studied the last time... Paul wrote about the horrific course of events that will happen to those who were persecuting them... and to the antichrist (when he does come.) They face a very DARK future... much worse than what the Thessalonian believers were experiencing from their tormentors. (Paul reminded them about his prior teaching... and the greater details he had given to them... when he was with them in person.)

Where we begin today in our study of 2nd Thessalonians... is Paul's continued effort to stabilize these shaken believers. And as I said earlier... WE need this same stabilizing. What Paul gives to them... is exactly what will keep us balanced... in our trembling world.

Now... I want to try something (here) that I think will help us appreciate what Paul does in our passage. What I want to do is some thing that I don't usually like for my students to do (who I teach public speaking to at the community college in Bend.) ... It generally seems rather corny... overused... and artificial. ... But I think that it serves a useful purpose to our passage.

I want you to close your eyes for a moment... and to try to imagine something. It won't be an easy task... but please try. (Some of you are thinking: "*Pastor... I always close my eyes when you preach... it's easier than you think!*") ... OK... So maybe it's just hard for me to ASK you to close your eyes while I preach. This is something unique that I may never ask you to do again. (It all depends on how many of you I can get to re-open your eyes when I am through with this illustration.) ... Alright... every eye closed...?

Please try to imagine the day when sin... death... and evil are finally defeated by Christ. ... I want you to do your best to conjure up the sense that you have been caught up (as the Apostle Paul once was) to the 3rd Heaven. ... Allow... as much as you can... of the indescribable joy and eternal peace (no worries what-so-ever!) to wash over you. ... Everything you (and everyone else) has ever strived to obtain – is all yours. ... Every pleasure that you hoped to derive from possessions (whether you only yearned for it – or you actually owned it.) ... You now have that beautiful body... perfect health... a strong bank account... recognition and respect from others... love... and problem-free relationships... **all the joy that you sought from those things** are now yours – to the ultimate degree! You have your whole heart's desire. There is nothing more you could ever want or need.

OK... now open your eyes! ... No! I mean it. Open them. Come on back now.

If it was actually possible for you to get a peek into Heaven... and if you were guaranteed of this future (and I mean **no** doubt – *nothing but certainty that it will be yours*) ... **wouldn't** it affect the way that you live now...? ...

Here is what I am getting at: to fear the worst kind of loss possible here on earth... would be like a millionaire fearing the loss of a penny. ... No! (Actually) it would be like a millionaire fearing a scratch on one of his pennies. ... **[P A U S E]** ...

This is how Paul sought to restore the stability of the Thessalonians... in their rocked world. ... Those who applaud and cheer the destruction of truth... and contribute to a crumbling society - have a DARK future. But that is not yours! You won't be facing the future that I just described as theirs. They have the tribulation. BUT **you** have a guaranteed glory! ... In fact that is how our passage begins - **B U T !**

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

This is amazing! And it is the same thing that Paul later wrote to the Roman church.

Romans 8:30-31 (ESV)

³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

(LISTEN!) There is no room... in a conviction that what Scriptures says here is true... for fears about Christian instability. ... Let the devil mount his fiercest attack... let the Antichrist be revealed and the rebellion break out... BECAUSE over against the instability of our circumstances... we set the eternal stability of the purpose of God! Amen...?

Please don't ever think that doctrine is only for "stuff-shirt Christians"! Don't ever see it as impractical and unnecessary! No matter what you may think about the doctrine of predestination... the Apostle Paul used it to provide stability to these Thessalonians... and to the Roman church. God loves us from the depths of His heart... and He wants us to be secure in the fact that He has *chosen us*. ... Our salvation is secure because it is based upon His having chosen us.

Some other time we can argue over the merits of this doctrine... as to which is more true (man's free will to choose God... or that God sovereignly chooses us.) ... I am not certain how both of these truths work. But I am certain of this: Paul treats predestination as a truth that will stabilize us in our shaky world. ... If God is for us, who can be against us?

When we endure pain and suffering... we need to remember that in spite of how others treat us... **God** loves us! We have a glorious future that makes all present suffering – a momentary and light suffering. ... Suffering believers need truthful doctrine... like the doctrine of predestination... to reassure and reorient them... (to bring God's promises back into focus.) (NOW)... even though Paul had such confidence in the stability of God's purpose... he writes something very surprising in the next verse.

2 Thessalonians 2:15

You or I would probably have reached a different conclusion from the truths expressed in verses 13-14. We might have said: “*Since God chose you... and called you to share in such a guaranteed eternal glory... you can relax! Take it easy!*” But Paul’s appeal is the opposite.

Far from easing and letting up... they must brace themselves. ... Far from lying down and falling asleep... they must stand firm. ... That is... in Paul’s confidence regarding God’s stable purpose for his people... instead of urging slackness... he actively engages them... to secure themselves. ... The apostle told the Thessalonians that they were to “*hold*” these traditions. The word is *krateō*... meaning “*to be strong*”... “*powerful*”... “*to be master of*.” ... They were to grasp the truth firmly.

He seems to picture a fierce gale... in which they are in danger both of being swept off their feet... and of being yanked from their handhold. ... In face of this hurricane-force wind... he urges them to stand their ground... planting their feet firmly... and to cling on to something solid and secure... clutching hold of it for dear life...! ... Since the storm may rage for a long time... they must keep on standing firm... and keep on holding fast.

God works in this world through the truth of His Word... and Satan opposes this truth by substituting his lies. ... Human nature is prone to believe a lie and resist the truth.

The “*traditions that you were taught by us*” was the apostolic truth in which Paul had grounded them. ... The word “*traditions*” has been much abused

because it has come to mean human teachings and religious practices that often contain a great deal of error interwoven with truth.

The word used in this verse is *παραδωσις* (paradosis)... meaning something that has been delivered from one person to another. It is (of course) a fact that New Testament truth was transmitted orally at first. ... It was handed by the Lord Jesus to His disciples and His chosen apostles (1 Cor. 11:23). It is not to be compared with the traditions handed on by the Jews and that later comprised the Talmud... of which the Jews were so zealous and about which the Lord roundly rebuked them. ... Nor is it to be compared with the traditions of which the Roman Catholic Church treats as being of equal weight and authority as the Scriptures.

The truth would enable them to stand firm. The key to withstanding the onslaught of false teaching was for the Thessalonians to keep a firm grasp on true teaching.

For us... the exhortation is the same... especially when faced with experiences of suffering. ... In times of pain... anguish... mourning... depression... or doubt... nothing is more stabilizing than the truth of Scripture — **nothing!** We should never cave in to the temptation to take uncertain steps or change course in the darkness of despair. ... If we do... we will certainly misstep... stumble from the right path... or trip over unseen obstacles.

Christians are in constant danger of being swept downstream by the currents of ungodly culture. They are also prone to let the truths they know and the relationship they enjoy with God grow cold. ... We need to vigorously **hold onto** what we have been taught by God's Word. The

Thessalonians were in danger of loosening their grip on the apostles' teachings which they had received in person from the missionaries and from their letters. ...They were in danger of slipping backward in their Christian experience because of the pressures of their trials and the daily negative influences of the world... the flesh... and the devil. And so are we!

(FOLKS!) If we only peek at our Bibles on Sunday... and maybe take a brief glance (*without engaging much thought in it*)... we don't stand a chance against the fierce gales that are blowing around us now and growing stronger.

What are you doing to stand firm and hold on tight...? I cannot encourage you strong enough to get involved in a midweek small group Bible Study with other believers! Trust me – you need it – BUT ONLY IF you want to be stable in a shaky world.

Paul's appeal for stability is made to the Thessalonians (...now please notice in verse 15) - as brothers. Why is that important...? Well... I see this as a recognition... that the context within which they were to 'stand firm... and hold to the teachings'... was among fellow brothers (and sisters) in Christ. ... In other words... we need each other. In community with other believers... (studying Scripture together)... is the best place to establish stability. This is where we can wrestle together with its contemporary application... as we teach and admonish each other out of the same Scriptures.

To be sure... private and personal Bible study is essential. ... Nevertheless... it also has its dangers. Left to ourselves... it is easy for us

to misinterpret the Word of God... to manipulate it to suit our prejudices... and to only see what our limited minds pick-up. ... So we need the insights... and the checks and balances of the Christian family... in order to help restrain our misunderstandings and establish us in the truth.

If you are not in a home group Bible study... what are you doing to hold firm...? Don't ignore Paul's exhortation. Somehow make sure that you are actively engaging your heart and mind with God's Word – and being stabilized by it! ... **[P A U S E]** ...

Paul not only exhorts his readers to stand firm... he then goes on to pray that God will establish them.

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Paul has already prayed twice for them in this letter. Here he is... praying again. Certainly he is concerned about their suffering. ... But there is something notoriously missing in each of his prayers for them. In fact... I do not recall ever seeing Paul pray for it – anywhere in Scripture – for believers who were being persecuted.

He doesn't pray that they will be immediately removed from the dark days in which they find themselves. (There is no petition for God to remove their hardship!) Instead... he prays that God would comfort them in light of the eternal comfort they have in Christ. He doesn't ask that they be spared the suffering they had been enduring. But rather... he asks that God would strengthen their hearts "*in every good work and word*".

“Thanks a lot Paul!” Would I be right to assume... that if you came to me and asked that I pray for you... because you were suffering some horrible persecution that has severely rocked you... and I did not ask God to remove it... but instead asked that God would make you a better servant of His through it... that our friendship would be severely damaged...? ...
“How dare you?!”

How typical it is for us who suffer to want God to snatch us from the trial... or step in and solve the problem! ... When the dark storms of life roll in... we want God’s help to outrun them.

But Paul prays much like Jesus did for His disciples in John 17:15.

John 17:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

In most cases... God allows the darkness to cover us so we can learn and grow through it... trusting in His grace... mercy... love... and strength.

Isaiah 43:2-4 (ESV)

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.

Are we praying the way that Jesus wants... when we pray for our hurting brothers and sisters...? ... Why are our prayers so different than Paul's... and Christ's...?

In a recent blog, Randy Alcorn discusses why God allows suffering in the lives of his people:

Mountain climbers could save time and energy if they reached the summit in a helicopter, but their ultimate purpose is conquest, not efficiency. Sure, they want to reach a goal, but they desire to do it by testing and deepening their character, discipline, and resolve.

God could create scientists, mathematicians, athletes, and musicians. He doesn't. He creates children who take on those roles over a long process. God doesn't make us fully Christlike the moment we're born again. He conforms us to the image of Christ gradually: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

In our spiritual lives, as in our professional lives, and in sports and hobbies, we improve and excel by handling failure and learning from it. Only in cultivating discipline, endurance, and patience do we find satisfaction and reward. And those qualities are most developed through some form of suffering.

Instead of asking God to remove their suffering... the Apostle Paul (through his prayer) reminds them of two things God has given them: "eternal encouragement" and "good hope." ... These two things are powerful!

Eternal encouragement will look beyond and outlast the afflictions of this age and the judgment to come. It is an encouragement that will sustain us until we fully experience our guaranteed glory. ... The second thing ("good hope") is not wishful thinking. It is a well-grounded expectation. It is a

firmly held and solidly based prospect. These are what Paul wrote about in our opening verses today (verses 13-14) – the certainty of our salvation... because He chose us.

After reminding them that they have these two things... Paul prays that God will comfort their hearts and establish these truths in their serving Him. (Here's the thing.) Ministry to others is the way God keeps us stable in our shaky world. God will encourage and steady you – as you reassure and help balance others. Luke 6:38 is not about giving money!

Luke 6:38 (ESV)

³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

Help others find their stability and God will stabilize you.

We may not understand everything that is happening in our lives... (and in our society) right now. ... We can't help but notice that **woke political agendas** are changing civilization at a break-neck speed. ... “*Critical race theory*” is preposterously telling us that *we need racism to fight racism*. ... “*Critical legal theory*” ludicrously claims that *laws have no rational basis* but simply reflect power inequities. ... Science is dying... (there are no longer any absolutes)... and superstition disguised as morality is returning. ... In light of all this... our world is getting angrier and more divided. ... It is an unstable world!

But here are three take-aways from our passage today... if you want to stay balanced. (1) Regularly meditate on this: *If God is for us, who can be against us?* (2) Actively stand and hold onto God's Word. (3) Help others find their stability.