

# **BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE THROUGH HOLDING FAST TO THE TEACHING**

## **2 Thessalonians 2:13-15**

### INTRODUCTION

During the past 30 years of my life there have been very few weeks in which I have not had a personal conversation with at least one other person to whom I am not related about personal matters. As you can imagine many of these conversations were either precipitated by or came to include the various kinds of trouble that people get into. The troubles have run the gamut from young men with broken hearts because the girl of their dreams dumped them, to college students panicked about what they should major in, to drug and alcohol addicts, to trouble relating to parents, trouble relating to children, trouble relating to a spouse, to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Most of the time for most of us our lives are fairly calm; but for all of us, some of the time, we are in trouble and sometimes very serious trouble. What is it that we need most when we are in trouble? When our relationships are in chaos or we are seized by mental anguish of some form or beset by enslaving bad habits or chronic physical pain dominates our lives or poverty appears at the door or we are threatened with physical harm or...what do we need?

I know this morning, as every Sunday morning that you have recently experienced trouble or are experiencing trouble or will soon have trouble. You are here in part in hopes of finding help for your trouble. What help does the church offer to people in trouble? We have, in Paul's second letter to the church in Thessalonica an example of what we have to offer to people in trouble. First of all, this letter is written to people who are confronted with serious trouble. Look back at chapter 1:4-6. They are experiencing persecutions and trials, suffering and trouble from others. It has been this way for these Christians since they first became Christians. Shortly after this church formed through the preaching of the apostle Paul the Jewish leaders in the town, jealous about Paul's success had formed a mob and sought to find and kill Paul and his companions. They had narrowly escaped with their lives. Since Paul and his companions fled the city the Christians who live in Thessalonica have been subjected to intimidation and threat and physical harm. Imagine the level of anxiety these people have faced for these many months and perhaps even years. Anyone who has ever been threatened by a bully can appreciate the kind of apprehension interrupted by periods of actual harm that this group of people has suffered under. What kind of help does Paul offer these people?

What Paul does is to remind them of the doctrine, the truth, the theology that he taught them when he was first with them. In v. 6 he reminds them that God is just and then explains what that means in their case. In vv. 9-10 he describes the return of Jesus and what will happen at that time. In 2:1-12 he sets out to correct false teaching that has arisen among them regarding the return of Jesus. In some way they have come under the influence of a false teaching which says that Jesus has already returned. So Paul sets out to correct this error. Look at 2:5: "Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?" Paul is convinced that a correct understanding of the doctrine concerning the return of Jesus is absolutely critical to their living in the midst of this trouble. Then after concluding his correction to this erroneous belief he gives one of the most succinct and beautiful summaries of the Christian gospel in the NT. In essence he tells them that he is rejoicing in this amazing salvation that God has provided for them. Immediately he follows that summary with the primary command of the letter and the main thing he wants to say to them. "Therefore," he says, "stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you whether by word of mouth or by letter." The main help that the church has to offer to people in trouble is the apostolic teaching, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The main thing that people in trouble need is theology, doctrine, truth. This is not what most of us when we are in trouble think. Most of us just want the trouble to go away. God wants us to understand him and his ways and to find him in the midst of and through the trouble. You cannot do this without knowing the truth that God has revealed about himself.

This morning it is my aim to convince you that what Paul says in 2:15 is indeed the main thing troubled people need. We need to know the truth that God has given to us in and through our Lord Jesus Christ and then we need to hold fast to that truth.

## MAIN POINT

**The truth about God and his world is what troubled people need because...**

### **I. Falsehoods lead us into trouble (3:6-15)**

In 3:6 we discover that when Paul says we are to hold fast to the teaching he is not only thinking about doctrinal truth but also about the lifestyle that corresponds to the gospel. Working to support yourself and paying for what you eat is a part of the teaching that Paul delivered to this church when he was with them. In fact, at the end of v. 10, he restates the truth he taught when he was with them: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." The reason that Paul is restating this truth is, as vv. 11-12 say, there are people in the church who are not working but who are idle. They are not busy but they are busybodies. We do not know if the reason these people are not working is because of the false teaching concerning the day of the Lord that Paul addresses in chapter 2. It would not be hard to see how this could be the case. If people think the world is ending they usually stop doing what they normally do and wait and cause trouble. This is possibly the case here, but as Paul does not make that connection we cannot know for sure. The point here is that there is a group of people in this church who, for some unknown reason, have refused to hold fast to the teaching regarding the necessity of working to support themselves. The result is that they are not only idle but they are going around prying into other people's business.

It doesn't take much imagination to realize that people who are intentionally unemployed, depending on family and friends to feed, clothe and house them and also engaged in commenting on other peoples lives are people in trouble and people who are causing trouble. I've not known lots of people like this but over the years I've known enough of them to know that this is a recipe for disaster. I don't know if this is where the cliché came from, but it certainly is true that "idle hands are the devil's playground." If your hands are not taken up with useful work then you will experience trouble as you will not be able to take care of yourself and those willing to help will grow smaller each day and you will cause trouble as you use your time to gossip and spread rumors and give advice to people who are working.

This is a specific example of how believing falsehoods or not believing and thus acting on the truth will lead you into trouble. This is a fundamental conviction of the entire bible. It begins in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve believe the lie of the devil who told them that God was not telling the truth when he said that they would die if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They rejected the truth that God was their loving Creator and sustainer and that he was perfectly righteous and faithful. Thus, they believed the lie of the devil that if they ate they would become like God. Immediately upon eating the fruit they found themselves in a world of hurt. They were cast out of the Garden of Eden into a world that no longer submitted to their work. They were thrown into a world of relational chaos where they each sought to dominate the other. Their firstborn son murders their second born son out of jealousy. Not believing in the love, goodness, justice, faithfulness of God and choosing to believe lies about God and his world led them and us into lives that are filled with trouble. Disease, divorce, murder, theft, natural disasters, etc. are all the result of this first act of rejecting the truth and believing a lie.

While much of the trouble we experience is directly the result of their believing a lie, yet there is much trouble in our lives that is due to our own refusal to believe what is true. God says he is the one who gives food to birds and clothes the lilies of the field in their beauty. He says that we who belong to Christ are far more valuable to him than birds and flowers and so we do not need to worry about food, clothing and shelter. We are not to run after these things the way our unbelieving neighbors do. While we must work, we are not to live as though money and what money buys is the source of our security and happiness. How much misery is there in our lives because we refuse to believe these truths? How many fights have you and your wife had over money because

you don't believe this? How much gut churning anxiety have you experienced because of your credit card debt because you did not believe that you cannot serve both God and money?

God says he is the creator and sustainer of marriage and he created sex and that he wants all of us to respect marriage and to control our sexual urges. How much misery is there in the world because we refuse to believe what God says? How many broken hearts among young people because they acted like married people when they were not married? How much physical pain and shame from STD's in this world due to our refusal to believe God? How many wounded and impoverished women and children in the world due men refusing to believe God? How many lonely people in the world because they treated marriage as something made for them to get their needs met, rather than as something God made and through which they were to glorify God? The list goes on and on. Much, if not most, of the trouble and misery in our lives is due to the fact that we have not held fast to the teaching, the gospel, the truth which we have been given in the Scriptures. There is a lot of trouble you can avoid in life if you will learn and then live the doctrine God has given us in his word and the lifestyle that corresponds to that doctrine. I'm not talking about learning God's rules. I'm talking about learning the gospel and the life that comes from faith in that gospel. I'm talking about loving the truth you learn about God and Christ and yourself and salvation which will lead to right behavior.

*The truth about God and his world is what troubled people need because...*

- *Falsehoods lead us into trouble*
- *And because...*

## **II. Faith in the truth delivers us from our greatest trouble (2:10b-14)**

At the heart of this letter to these troubled people is a magnificent summary of the gospel, in vv. 13-14. It is set in contrast to what is true of all those who will perish in vv. 10-12. In 10b we are told that people perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved. In v. 12 these same people are described a little differently. They are condemned because they have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. So here is this description of all those people who are going to be condemned by God, that is, to perish, or not be saved: they do not love or believe the truth and they delight in wickedness. Notice in v. 12 that it is all who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness that will be condemned. I skipped v. 11 because it is so terrifying a verse. It says that because people don't love the truth God sends a powerful delusion so that they believe the lie, the falsehoods about the nature of reality that find their origin in Satan himself. Notice God sends the delusion upon those who do not believe so that they will believe the lie and so that they will end up condemned. My dear friends, it is not unjust for God to do this. He does this to people who refuse to love and trust the truth and who love wickedness. He is under no obligation to be merciful to anyone. There is no human being who has the right to say to God, "you cannot send a delusion upon me because of who I am or what I have done." All of us have loved wickedness and not loved the truth and thus it would be entirely just of God to send this delusion upon each one of us.

This is why Paul starts his next verse by giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians. He thanks God because God chose them to be saved. Please do not miss this. God chose them to be saved just as he chose to send a delusion upon others. He acted graciously towards the Thessalonians and justly towards those who are perishing. The reason God chose them is because he loved them. He freely, before the world began, according to Paul in Ephesians 1, determined to love them and he chose them to be saved. Notice he executed their salvation through or by means of the sanctifying power of the HS and through their faith in the truth. God sent the HS to these he loved and chose and by the almighty work of the HS he made them holy, that is he set them apart as his belonging to him. He took these people from out of the mass of those who are perishing, contrary to what they deserved and marked them as belonging to himself. Then God gave them faith in the truth. So the way they know they are not perishing but have been saved is because they have faith in the truth of Jesus.

Then in v. 14 he says that God himself called them to this salvation through or by means of the gospel. The calling referred to here is God's effectual calling. That is the same calling Jesus exercised in the case of 4 day

dead Lazarus. He commands the dead to live through the gospel and so they live. So the truth that called them into life and which they believed is the truth that Christ is the Son of God who became man and lived a perfect life and willingly died on the cross for their sins and has risen from the dead and now sits at God's right hand waiting for the day when he will return to complete what he began. This salvation is described in the second half of v. 14. It is sharing in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than being condemned and perishing we are going to live forever sharing in the glory that belongs to Jesus Christ because of his obedient life and willing death. Please do not miss this very simple fact, Paul thanks God for all of this. This is not just some pious thing that religious people say. This is not religious mumbo jumbo. He thanks God for all of this, including the faith they have in the truth because God did all of this. When Jaimee gave me the CD: "REO Speedwagon's Greatest Hits" for Christmas, I did not thank Jordan, I thanked Jaimee. I did not pat myself on the back and say, "way to go John for buying this CD." It thanked Jaimee because Jaimee gave it to me. So when Paul thanks God he means that God did all of this and he alone deserves the thanks.

Again, when you remember the kind of trouble these people are in you can see exactly what he is doing for them. Yes, he acknowledges the trouble but then he reminds them of these amazing facts. You are not going to hell. God did not send a powerful delusion upon you as he could have done but instead he loved you and chose you and sent his HS and sent you the gospel and gave you faith in that gospel and has guaranteed that one day you will share in all the glory that the eternal Son of God is receiving in heaven. The worse thing that could ever happen to you, to be condemned by God will never happen to you. The best thing that can ever happen to you has happened and is going to happen. It is these truths to which you must cling. Whatever trouble you might be in, if you are one of those who has faith in the truth of the gospel, then you need to know that this trouble is nothing compared to the trouble you have escaped and the pleasure that awaits you at the end of this life. Therefore, you need to know the truth and you need to hold fast to the truth.

*The truth about God and his world is what troubled people need because...*

- *Falsehoods lead us into trouble*
- *Faith in the truth delivers us from our greatest trouble*
- *And because...*

### **III. Truth produces endurance (2:15a)**

The command at the beginning of v. 15 is the main thing Paul wants them to do in the midst of this trouble. Stand firm. About 10 of the 47 verses in this brief letter mention perseverance, standing firm. While it is true that the steadfastness Paul is calling for is steadfastness in believing and obeying the truth of the gospel, yet it is also true that the way we remain steadfast is through the truth. Why else would Paul spend most of the letter reminding them of the truth he taught them? This just makes sense. Paul wants them to keep depending upon this truth that they have believed; not to let go of it but to cling to it the way a drowning man clings to the lifejacket thrown to him. The better you know this truth, the more fully the glory of this gospel is grasped by you, the more certain it is that you will not abandon Christ when trouble comes. This is one of the reasons we come to church, so that we might understand and thus delight in the greatness of Christ and his salvation in greater ways so that we will not give up. This is why we read the Bible and go to Bible studies and attend Foundations in the Faith and read hard books about God and talk with our friends about what we are learning. We are out to know the truth of this gospel so that we will trust and love Jesus more so that we will not ever give up, no matter what happens to us. We pray that God's salvation in Christ will appear so great to us that we will endure whatever hardship may come to us rather than turn aside from that path that leads to our sharing in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Most of you have heard me share how God has sustained me and my family through Jared's accident and ongoing disability. I have told you that if not for God's awakening me to the truth prior to Jared's accident I would not still be a Christian. I would not have stood firm in this storm. It has been the truth expressed here in vv. 13-14 that has held me and my family these seven years. God has loved me and Jared and my family. Not

in some vague, general, God loves everybody kind of way. But before the worlds began, contrary to what we have ever deserved, God chose to love us and he showed us his love by the coming of the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God taking on human flesh and dying for us, particularly. Jared and I and Jane and our believing children were in the mind of Jesus when he died. He loved us and chose us to be his own and died for us so that we might be saved, that we might share in the eternal glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. He brought the gospel to us, he sent the Spirit to sanctify us and he gave us faith, because he loves us. While our life is full of sorrow each day now we know, because of the sanctifying work of the Spirit that the present suffering is not even worth comparing to the glory to be revealed. There is joy unspeakable awaiting us.

Therefore, we also know because of all that God has done for us in Christ that this trouble which God has sent to us is for our eternal good. We do believe the truth of God's sovereign rule over all evil and all suffering as it is expressed in Hebrews 12:5-7, "My son do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. The Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" While we do not always understand the specific purposes of our particular trouble we do know that our loving Father, who has demonstrated that love in the sending and suffering of his son, has sent this trouble to us for our eternal joy. So this truth that we know and are growing to know better creates endurance in us and we hold fast to, stand firm in this truth. How I praise God for the many faithful teachers, both dead and living, who have had the courage and wisdom to proclaim this truth so that I could learn it and be held by it as I hold fast to it.

My friends, you need to know the truth of God in Christ, you need to trust and love that truth because trouble is coming. You and I are not in charge of the kind of trouble that is coming, but it is coming, if not in this life, then in the next. The only way you will be able to stand fast in the trouble is if you know, trust and love the truth that God has revealed about himself and his saving work in Christ. I urge you, this year, to make use of all the means God has given you to know the truth and plead with him that he might give you faith in that truth. I want to say a word in particular to our young people, to you teenagers. Most of you have not had much trouble yet. But it is coming. You have a lifetime of trouble stretching out before you, which will end in a great day of trouble at your death and then your standing before God your judge. I urge you to not waste these years of relative leisure, when you don't need to work to support yourself playing video games, texting your friends, watching movies, telling your friends on Face Book and MySpace what you're doing every moment of the day and reading about what they are doing and watching YouTube and the other endless mind-numbing entertainments available to you. Study the Bible. Come to Foundations in the Faith. Go to a small group with wise adults and listen and learn. Use your youth to learn the truth. Do not waste your life on the trinkets and trivia of our impoverished popular culture. Your friends on Face Book will be of no help to you when trouble comes or you stand in the judgment. Only Jesus can help you and so you must seek him now by seeking to know the truth about him.

*The truth about God and his world is what troubled people need because...*

- *Falsehoods lead us into trouble*
- *Faith in the truth delivers us from our greatest trouble*
- *Truth produces endurance*

© Copyright 2008 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. [mail@riverhillsonline.org](mailto:mail@riverhillsonline.org)