

The Struggle to Stand Firm

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 May 2015

Preacher: Gerhard Agenbag

[0 : 00] Now, one of the interesting things for us who live overseas is just seeing how things have changed over the past two or three years. For those of you who don't often go away for a long period of time, you don't actually know or realize how much things change.

We might be noticing new developments, children growing older, new are born. One of the main things, of course, is the difference in availability of electricity.

Street names being changed. The other day I drove to Bloemfontein, which is my hometown, and I used to take the Jagersfontein off of it to go into my hometown.

But this time I had to choose between Walter Sussulu and Nelson Mandela Road, and I didn't know which one to take. And so things keep changing. One of the best things to see is after a season, someone maybe has gone through a season of hardship, difficulty, yet you see a person growing in their faith, becoming strong in their faith.

While the saddest thing to see is when someone has grown aloof or cold in their faith, while previously following the Lord Jesus Christ, gradually becoming more interested in career advanced, perhaps weekend sports, the latest gadgets, or simply being tired or just no longer interested.

[1 : 28] So whether we are in China or in South Africa, we all find it a struggle to stand firm in our faith. And so this morning I would like to show you from God's Word three ministries by which we can help one another, by which we can encourage one another to stand firm in our faith.

I believe that these three areas is as helpful as it is for us in China. And so will you please keep your Bibles open to that passage that I've read, and I'm going to refer to it shortly.

Let me just give you some background to this passage. Well, Paul and Timothy and Silas are on their second missionary journey, and they are busy proclaiming the good news of the gospel in Thessalonica in Greece.

And according to Paul's normal missionary strategy, he first proclaimed the gospel to the Jews in the synagogues, as well as the God-fearing Greeks, who met there to study Old Testament Scripture.

This strategy made a lot of sense, because the Jews, as well as these God-fearing Greeks, already knew the Old Testament Scriptures, and they had the expectation of becoming Messiah.

[2 : 45] And so we find Paul here in Acts 17, or in Acts 17, reasoning in the synagogue for three weeks, and proving from the Scripture that Jesus is the Christ, He is the coming Messiah, God had raised him from the dead, and He is the one to come.

And so He calls them to faith and repentance. And so, as is normally the case, you find that some of the Jews repented, and they believed, while the others, especially the Jewish leaders, did not repent.

Rather, they stirred up opposition. They were unbelieving, hard to hearts, and seeking to obstruct and to persecute believers.

So the missionaries' lives then was in such danger that the believers had to escape by night. And so the believers literally put them out of the city to flee by night.

And so Paul's opposition then used this flight by night to then say, oh well, look at this Paul, he flees. And so they used this to discredit his ministry, to discredit his message among this new group of believers.

[4 : 03] And so Paul, obviously then knowing how these unbelieving Jewish leaders would use his absence, felt very anxious for their faith and their stability as the believers continued to face hardship, persecution, as well as temptation in a hostile Christian, non-Christian world.

And so from this passage then, I would like to highlight to you three areas of ministry, three ministries to help us stand firm. And I don't know if you have it on there.

Next slide. A ministry of prayer, a ministry of encouragement, and then also a ministry of equipping. First of all, then a ministry of prayer.

Now we're going to notice there a prayer of concern as well as a prayer of joy. Now one of my most favorite dishes in China is the so-called Tang Chuliji, which is simply sweet and sour pork.

And why we like it so much is that mix between sweet and bitter. It's a bittersweet, we say sometimes a bittersweet experience.

[5 : 12] So Paul here, he responds in a mixed emotional way, flowing from both suffering and joy in ministry. Notes there how he writes in verse 17 of chapter 2.

See, Paul's flight by night caused him the anxiety of a parent, who like in a time of war, for example, became separated from his little children.

And then the unnatural circumstances prevented him from being reunited with his children. And so this caused him immense anxiety.

It caused him immense concern. And so like a good father, he tried to be reunited with his children.

He tried everything to go back to them, to support them and to encourage them.

And yet it seemed that it just didn't work. He just couldn't find a way of getting back to them.

Sometimes in China, we do have this type of situation.

[6 : 22] Maybe you came, you study the language for three, four years, and then you enjoy a season of ministry. And then suddenly the government might say, okay, well, you can no longer stay.

They revoke your visa or someone. We've had a number of our friends just simply develop cancer and they had to go home. And then suddenly your doors are closed and there's just no way for you to go back.

But Paul is here able to look into the spiritual realm and do not simply see the natural circumstances. No, he's recognizing there the work of an enemy. Look in verse 18.

See, Paul perceives here that ultimately the set of circumstances preventing him from being reunited with the believers was Satan's mission of destabilization, his mission of discouragement, his mission of temptation.

However, Paul is not only able to see into the spiritual realm and there see the work of Satan. No, he's much clearer able to also see there the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 38] Notice there in verse 19. See, Paul can pray for joy for them because he doesn't just see a group of weak, unstable, afflicted Christians.

No, he looks into the spiritual realm and he sees there Jesus Christ at work in their lives. Jesus Christ holding them up. Jesus Christ sustaining them.

Jesus Christ protecting them against the work of the enemy. He rejoices because he knows that his own victory crown, his own reward, his own service in the kingdom, his own crown of victory in the day that Jesus Christ comes is very closely connected with them.

In other words, they themselves will be his victory crown. And so for Paul, there will be no greater joy than to present them holy, mature and blameless in Christ when he comes again.

Verse 9. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we will see you again.

[9 : 10] And so the picture that we have here is of Paul spending time. Paul is there in the presence of God praying for them. Praying with anxiety, praying with concern, yet praying joyfully, rejoicing over what God is busy doing.

Paul literally is rejoicing with God over what God is busy doing in their lives. And so firstly then this morning, we can strengthen one another through prayer.

We cannot help to be touched by Paul's intimate prayer relationship that he has with his believers.

His lifestyle is saturated with prayer and concern and joy over the people which he wants to present before Christ, holy and mature.

Paul's example invites you and me to also devote our lives to praying for one another, to praying and interceding for people who are struggling in their faith.

Of course it means that we can pray for the struggling church, like in the Middle East or in China.

But perhaps you should ask God to lay someone particular on your heart this morning or this week.

[10 : 27] A neighbor, a colleague, an employee. And so whether it is locally or overseas, there are people in need of your prayers. And so firstly, we can strengthen one another through a ministry of prayer.

Secondly, a ministry of encouragement. Now Paul did not limit his ministry to prayer and letter writing. No, you can see how Paul also takes action in chapter 3, verse 1.

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker, in spreading the gospel of Christ.

Now it's wonderful to see how Paul is willing to sacrifice the fellowship and the support and the encouragement of his best colleague, of his best friend, and his son in faith, Timothy, and sending him off on a long journey of 800 kilometers over perhaps a dangerous territory to go and encourage the Thessalonian believers.

But what then is the assignment that Timothy is to carry out? Notice there in verse 2, we sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage you in your faith so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.

[11 : 56] You know quite well that we were destined for him. So note there that Timothy is to strengthen and encourage these believers in faith. Timothy needed to strengthen them because Paul feared for his stability because of Satan's attack upon them.

Look again in verse 5. I was afraid that in some way the tempter may have tempted you and our efforts may have been useless or might have been useless.

See, Satan's strategy is often a little bit like the terrorist groups that we know of today like ISIS who wants to destabilize, to intimidate, to cause fear and discouragement.

And what the NIV translates here as tempted, you can directly translate that their faith might not have become unsettled. You know, it's like a structure that is becoming unstable, about to collapse. Actually, it literally means that your faith might not be like the wagging of a dog's tail. And so perhaps I can ask you today, well, what is causing your faith to become like the wagging of a dog's tail, like the tossing of the waves?

[13 : 15] Unstable, fearful, doubtful. Well, perhaps it's our country, the situation in our country, maybe your job or your family situation, maybe your health is deteriorating.

Perhaps you feel God is not exactly responsive to your needs or He's not maybe treating you fairly. Or perhaps this is how you feel this morning, unstable, discouraged.

And so what then is needed here is a personal ministry of encouragement and strengthening. Look again there in verse 2.

We sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage you in your faith so that no one would be unsettled by his trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them.

And so what is our task then as God's people this morning? Our task is to stabilize that which has been destabilized, to strengthen those who have become weak and to encourage those who are losing heart.

[14 : 24] And therefore it is our task as God's people this morning to be sensitive to the needs of people around you, to look around and say, well, who is struggling? Who is going through times of temptation?

Who is discouraged or disappointed so that we may strengthen and encourage one another so that we can stand firm?

Now I believe that each one of us as God's people have already received sufficient encouragement from God that we in turn may encourage others.

Therefore this morning the Spirit of God calls each one of us to engage in a ministry of encouragement. Also for us in China, this ministry of encouragement and strengthening is at the heart of what we believe God has called us to do.

Ministering alongside people who often go through struggles and temptations and discouragement in a non-Christian hostile world in which we live.

[15 : 32] And so from experience we also know that the more we reach out to encourage other people, the more we turn from our own struggles and we look outward and come alongside someone else, often we ourselves are being strengthened in that process.

But often as God's children, we tend to get discouraged when things don't work out or because deep down I feel that, well, I deserve that God should bless me in all things.

I deserve to be always healthy. Just because I read the Bible, you know, I'm a good Christian. I faithfully come to church every Sunday. I'm serving in the ministries or I'm serving as a missionary overseas.

But note Paul's word of encouragement. It's not actually the words I would have chosen to encourage someone, but note there what he writes in this for.

In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that you would be persecuted. You would go through hardships and trials. And it turned out that way as you well know.

[16 : 39] And so our encouragement then lies in knowing that the normal Christian life will entail difficulty, will entail hardship, opposition, temptation.

And our words of encouragement therefore should remind people that we are in fact going through seasons of suffering while we keep our eyes on the future glory that we will receive when Jesus Christ comes again.

And so we can summarize that the ministry of encouragement involves both a personal touch, a face-to-face mutual encouragement of one another, as well as right teaching about the cost of gospel living.

So let us then this morning strengthen one another through a ministry of prayer, a ministry of encouragement, and then finally the ministry of equipping.

Note then verse 7. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution, we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

[17 : 48] For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now it's interesting to see how the faith of the believers, the Thessalonian believers actually encourage Paul. But Paul, even though he is encouraged by their faith, he wants more than just for them to be standing firm.

Notice there, he wants to supply that which is still lacking. Now the supply what is lacking is the same Greek word that Paul uses in Ephesians 4 verse 12, where he writes, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

In other words, what Paul wants to see here, is he wants to properly equip Christians, Christian believers for a lifestyle of godliness, as well as for a Christian ministry of fruitfulness.

A lifestyle of godliness and the ministry of fruitfulness. Now naturally it speaks to all of us, because all of us still have sin, all of us have weaknesses, all of us have areas in need of filling up, in our godliness and in our training.

[19 : 14] Even though you may be far along in your faith, there remain areas of lack, lacking of character and lacking in training and equipping that needs filling up.

And that's why Paul prays there in chapter 3 verse 12. Notice that prayer. 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. See, so all of us need to grow in love and holiness and maturity.

And often these are exactly the areas in which we as a church struggle. Areas where we lack love, which leads to conflicts and jealousies and impatience with one another.

Areas of wrong love, that leads to perhaps impurity or sexual sin. And therefore we also need to engage in the ministry of filling up.

[20 : 18] Now that filling up might mean on the one hand to equip, on the other hand it might be to rebuke, to keep accountable. And so it calls us to personal accountability and discipleship relationships with one another.

It calls us to take responsibility for one another, to rebuke and exhort one another when we observe compromise or coldness or decline in faith.

It means that the mature should reach out and come and draw alongside those who are still young in faith. And it means that those who are weak and young in their faith should reach out and ask for help from those who are mature.

And so we see therefore then, if we want to stand firm in our faith and persevere in standing firm in our faith, it calls us to pray for one another.

It calls us to encourage one another and to take responsibility for one another. It's a ministry of prayer, it's a ministry of encouragement, and it's a ministry of equipping.

[21 : 29] Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do need your help. And we ask that our love will increase and overflow for one another.

Will you please strengthen our hearts as we pray for one another, as we encourage one another, and as we equip one another. Will you grant that by your Holy Spirit we will be found holy and

blameless when Jesus Christ comes again.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.