

The Lord is Faithful

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of December 2000.

The preacher is Phil Millman. His sermon is entitled, The Lord is Faithful, and is from 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, to 3, verse 5.

Our Father, we pray that you would open our hearts to help us understand your word. May it live in our hearts and may we grow more closer to you as a result. Amen.

Amen. I have no sound, I don't think. You may like to open your Bibles at page 962 as we look at the letter that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians as we've been looking at it over the past few weeks. And in the passage I preached from last week, from chapter 2 of 2 Thessalonians, verses 9 to 12, it also provides a picture in which the gospel is rejected and evil prevails, as well as in which God allows people to sink into the mess that they make of their lives, and in which the first casualty is truth and people delight in wickedness.

[1 : 43] It almost sounds a bit like a soap opera, doesn't it? That's the sort of world that we live in. A frightening, uncertain, hostile place.

A dark world haunted by ghosts of wickedness past, wrecked by the news of the violent present, oppressed by fears of horrors to come.

Devastation, devastation and destruction. Misery is our lot. And more misery, it seems, our destination.

For most people, this new millennium holds no prospect of hope for a new start. Unless, unless, that is, you are loved by the Lord, and I'm talking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

To be loved by Him in the midst of all that danger and misery is to walk secure through the minefield, to fall safe into a parent's arms, to lie down beside still waters to quite astound us.

[2 : 52] But I want to ask you this morning, what does it mean to belong to Jesus? And there are three things that I want to draw out from the passage that Russell has read to us.

I think it means, firstly, being the first fruits for Him, for Jesus. Secondly, it means standing for Him, as well as facing danger for Him. And the third thing is that it means praying for those especially gifted in telling others about Jesus.

Well, being first fruits for Him. If you look at verse 13 of 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, it begins with the words, but we, the emphatic words, but we, from all that's gone on, the misery and so on.

In contrast to all of that and that uncertainty, we as Christians have a different story to tell. But Paul doesn't rejoice for himself.

He now repeats this Thanksgiving from the beginning of the letter. Remember, at the beginning of this letter, he gives thanks to God for these Thessalonians, rejoicing, and here he is rejoicing that these beloved Thessalonians are secure within this threatening world.

[4 : 09] Paul has confidence. But what is this confidence, and on whom does it rest? The answer is, of course, that his confidence lies in God.

If you look at verses 13 and 14 again, it says, but we must always give thanks to God for you, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit, and through belief in the truth.

For this purpose, he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is giving thanks to God here, because when he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in Thessalonica, these people to whom he is writing had responded to it, and as a result, were saved.

Salvation came their way. Not because of the word, necessarily, that Paul spoke, rather because God's Holy Spirit helped them to understand the message that Paul preached.

It resulted, for these Christians in Thessalonica, changed lives, and sanctification to those whom he is writing. That is, they were being made holy by the work of the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 47] As the gospel was preached, in a sense, evil was being held back, it was being restrained, and lives were being changed as a result.

The gospel was changing people's lives. Now this too ought to give us confidence, as we seek to proclaim the truths of the gospel in our culture. The reason being is that, as we proclaim the truths of the gospel, we can have confidence that God's Spirit will be involved in the process, calling out those who are his.

It's God who calls them out. It's kind of like being called up or conscripted into God's army. It's not a call that you can turn down.

And that's how these Thessalonians experienced it. They were transformed when the gospel was preached. God called them out. And looking at them, Paul knew that God had chosen them because of the way they believed the gospel and held to it, even under the persecutions and the afflictions that they had been enduring, as we've looked at over the past two weeks.

Now the world doesn't believe the truth. Rather, it delights in wickedness. But the Thessalonians here have believed the truth and have been touched by the holiness of the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 12] So the work of the Holy Spirit for Paul is always obvious. Because of what happened to them in the past, they can now call themselves loved by the Lord, chosen as first fruits, if you like.

To know deep in our hearts that we are loved for all of us is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Yesterday we had a wedding here and it was wonderful to see two people in love and have a deep love for one another as they set out on their married life together.

To know deep in our hearts that we are loved is a wonderful thing. Yet sadly, it is an experience denied to so many people in our world today.

All who believe in the gospel, though, come into this immediate awareness that they are loved by Christ who died for them. Sometimes this sense of being loved, though, is hard to take on.

It's hard to take on. It's hard to keep because of our background, of our family background and our experience. We don't think that God can love us because we have never felt loved within our family.

[8 : 25] But to be a Christian is to be loved by God. It's a Christian's birthright. We are loved by God. God's graciousness is poured out upon his people.

Now the fact that Paul writes on here, God chose you as the first fruits, adds another point. God has chosen these Thessalonians not just for their own sake, but for the sake of those around them in Thessalonica and beyond as well.

The word first fruits in the Old Testament refers to the first bit of harvest specially belonging to God and was offered to him in thankfulness for the whole harvest about to be gathered.

Now this church in Thessalonica is small, it's persecuted, it's weak, and it's despised. But they are only the first fruits of God's harvest in that city. Being chosen means being strategically placed for spreading the good news and reaping the harvest.

The benefit of being called and chosen by God is that you will obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ as we see at the end of verse 14. Now we enter into that glory the moment we profess belief in Jesus and we submit to his rule and lordship in our lives.

[9 : 48] We enter into that glory. But the realisation of that glory is not actually received until we meet him face to face in heaven. We get glimpses of that glory here on earth but it's not realised in its entirety until we get to heaven.

But knowing that we belong to Jesus means that we are the first fruits for him not just for our own sakes but for the sakes of those around us as well.

So then knowing that we belong to Jesus means firstly that we are the first fruits for him and it also means that we stand for him.

If you look at verses 15 to 17 the apostle urges the Thessalonians to stand firm for the Lord and to stand firm for the Lord in a society that seems hostile and we see as we go through these few verses that he prays for the things they need in order to do that.

So in verse 15 he begins So then brothers and sisters Paul is now seeking to draw some conclusions from all that he has written in the first two chapters that we've looked at so far and though they might be unsettled or shaken or alarmed by the things that have happened to them since becoming Christians which is what we looked at last week Paul feels that he has given them sufficient reasons to stand firm and he has shown them as we saw last week that the day of the

Lord the return of Jesus has not yet come and he has given them the reasons why and one of those reasons is that the lawless one has not yet appeared.

[11 : 29] So now he tells them in standing firm what their response should be. Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Paul wants them to stand firm in the teaching that they have received while he was with them and in the letter that he sent to them previously. That's what they are to hold on to.

Like trekkers crossing a swollen river they need something to hold on to or they'll be swept away. Now if these Thessalonian Christians were to hold on to the false teaching that had come to them about the day of the Lord it would have led to a disaster for them.

They would have been swept away so to speak. But if they are to hold on and hold fast to the traditions that were taught by Paul either in these letters or when he was with them face to face then they will be able to stand.

But what are the traditions that Paul is talking about here? Traditions, it's such a big word, have so many meanings. I don't think the traditions that Paul is referring to are church traditions and the trappings that come with denominationalism or Anglicanism for example.

[12 : 51] The traditions taught by Paul to these Thessalonians by mouth and letter are none other than the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the traditions that Paul taught about the gospel of Jesus are no less than what we should teach about today.

Those traditions he taught are there for us to look at and read and absorb and inwardly digest and so on in God's word, scripture. And we should therefore hold tightly to it.

But in our day and age we find ourselves awash with false and deceptive teaching, pluralism of all sorts of kinds coming in, even into the church.

In some so-called Christian circles the gospel of Jesus has become so watered down that Jesus hardly gets a look in. As Christians we need to hold tightly to scripture and use it as our safeguard from being misled by others.

Let me give you an example. I was at a meeting a few weeks ago where there was an initiative, a new initiative being introduced in this city of Manningham. It's called Character First.

[14 : 02] And the initiative itself is promoting character in people and the program I think is actually quite a good project on the whole. But in the discussion that followed one person who's a Christian leader in the community stood up and said something to the effect that this is a great initiative because this after all what they were talking about is the gospel.

Well friends that's not the gospel as I read about it if we just talk about character. That's perhaps a social gospel. But the gospel as I read about it in scripture is all about Jesus Christ and the good news of salvation that is available through him.

That's not what was being talked about in this Character First initiative. But that message of the good news of Jesus Christ is the message that we as his followers are to proclaim.

Words that draw attention to Jesus and the saving work that he has done for us on the cross. That's the gospel. It's not some other watered down version that many like to make up.

The gospel as we see it in scripture which is the same message that Paul preached is the message that needs to be proclaimed in this new millennium. Now Paul knows that the Thessalonians can't proclaim this gospel message on their own strength and so he bursts into prayer for them in verses 16 and 17.

[15 : 27] He says, Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Paul directs his prayer to Jesus asking that God will encourage and strengthen the Thessalonians to do every good work and word. Now there's a sermon itself in just these two verses but here is a prayer that we should use for others and for ourselves as we seek to proclaim Jesus in all that we do.

So belonging to Jesus means then firstly that we are first fruits for him. It also means secondly that we stand for him by holding fast to scripture and asking God to sustain us along the way in the process if you like.

And the third thing I want to say is that belonging to Jesus also means praying for those especially gifted in telling others about him. Having just prayed for the Thessalonians in verses 16 and 17 Paul now asks them to pray for him and his companions and his prayer has two requests.

First of all he says in chapter 3 verse 1 Pray for us so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere just as it is among you.

[17 : 00] The prayer request is that the gospel of Jesus would not just be spoken of but that it would be received and accepted and that God would be glorified as a result.

That's what happened in Thessalonica when the gospel message was proclaimed and received by these people there. Paul's prayer is to see fruit from the gospel proclamation in other parts of the world just as he has seen here in Thessalonica.

So that's his first request and his second request is for those who proclaim the message that he and his companions in verse 2 may be rescued from wicked and evil people.

Perhaps the wicked and evil people Paul has in mind are like those people in Thessalonica who had instigated a riot in order to hinder the preaching of the gospel. If you were to have a look at Acts chapter 17 you'll see there in the first few verses of how the gospel came to Thessalonica and people stirred up a riot within the township there to drive Paul out and to prevent the gospel from being proclaimed any further.

So I think the people there would have had a very real idea of what was going on when he says pray for them that they may be rescued from wicked and evil people. Again there is a formula fit here as we seek to pray ourselves for our missionaries and for ourselves here in Holy Trinity in making Jesus known.

[18 : 33] We ought always be praying for opportunities to tell others about Jesus and praying for opportunities for others who are especially gifted in telling people about Jesus.

And in our prayers we should be asking that people would respond in faith and obedience to the good news of Jesus. It should be a prayer. And in addition to this we should be praying that the gospel message will continue to spread throughout the world.

I wonder whether we have indeed become complacent in that area of our prayers. We think that the world with globalization and so on means that the gospel has gone out to all parts of the world.

In a sense that's true but we need to keep on praying that the gospel will keep on impacting in every area of the world. In our prayers we also ought to be praying as Paul requests here that opposition to the gospel would cease.

One writer says of this passage that the spread of the gospel is fueled by the prayer of the church. The spread of the gospel is fueled by the prayer of the church.

[19 : 48] I think that this is a challenge for all of us to be praying. It's a challenge for all of us to be praying for the spread of the gospel here in Doncaster here in the city of Melbourne and beyond this city in Australia and throughout the world.

Why don't we start praying if we're not already that God will raise up gifted people from this parish to spread the good news of Jesus. Finally, after having asked for prayer Paul now returns to encouraging this community of Christians.

After saying at the end of verse 2 that not all have faith referring to the world in general Paul goes on to remind the people about the Lord's faithfulness and in verse 3 he says but the Lord is faithful he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.

Despite the hardships and the oppositions they may have to endure or have already endured for being Christians the Lord is faithful the Lord is faithful.

You'll notice in verse 4 that Paul's confidence lies again in Jesus concerning these Thessalonians. It's not necessarily in people although that could be the case but his confidence is solely in Jesus Christ.

[21 : 14] As people place their trust in Jesus he will enable them to endure the obstacles that get in their way. Paul's confidence is in the Lord because he is faithful.

With the knowledge of God's faithfulness we then can have great assurance and that assurance should translate into perseverance despite the hardships that we might endure in this life.

Now it's important to realise as Christians that we're not exempt from hardship and persecution and I've spoken on that issue a number of times this year.

Christianity is not a quick fix treatment or a short term solution for the problems that we may have whatever they might be. Another writer in the New Testament in the book of Hebrews expresses a similar idea when he encourages his readers to run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 and 2 Similarly Jesus himself says to the disciples that the one who endures to the end will be saved.

[22 : 38] The marathoner perseveres despite a protesting and aching body. The sculptor perseveres despite the stone that they're trying to work on won't chip.

He perseveres at it. The husband and the wife persevere despite the strains of marriage. God's people persist in their commitment to the Lord despite the trials, challenges and temptations that come their way.

The temptation to abandon what at times seems like a total absurdity. Why? Because the Lord is faithful.

And because in the end Jesus wins. This world will pass away. and in the end Jesus will be seen to be the victor.

Jesus wins. The one who has been faithful in the past, that is Jesus himself being faithful and obedient all the way to the cross, will prove to be faithful in the future.

[23 : 51] And this gives us courage and hope to remain faithful in the present. Let me conclude by saying that the world we live in is a great world.

I love it. Good people. It's great to be with people. But as I said at the beginning, it also produces a lot of misery. However, with our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus and placing our confidence in God, we can have great assurance that we will see through that misery and rest safely in the arms of our risen Lord Jesus, sharing in the blessings that he has for those who belong to him because Jesus is faithful.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for your word that you have given to us, your people. We pray that as your people, we would hold fast to it, stand firm, and not be swayed.

Lord, we pray that our confidence lies solely in you. Father, where we are lacking in faith, may it increase.

Where we feel unloved, Lord, we pray that the power of the gospel would break through and show us your love for us.

[25 : 19] Help us to understand that. and as a result, to be witnesses and witnesses for you in this world, in the city of Doncaster, Melbourne, and beyond.

Please help us to be faithful in the gospel proclamation and to be faithful in praying for those who are especially gifted in that area. And we ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. God bless them.

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