

Stand Firm for Triumph

- ✠ Sanctified by the Spirit (2:13-15)
- ✠ Strengthened by Jesus (2:16-17)
- ✠ Protected by God's love (3:1-5)

In the name of Jesus, our triumphant Lord and Savior, dear fellow saints of God:

It must have been a Sunday afternoon over twenty years ago. Dinner was done, good time for a wrestling match between this Dad and his two older children. My plan was to work them over good until they were tired. Then I could rest. After about ten minutes son Joel had enough. That left only Katie. Ten minutes more, still Katie. Another ten minutes, and I said, "Katie, I'm tired. Dad needs a nap."

How long can you go before you give up? Family wrestling matches gain higher stakes each passing year. Struggles aren't so physical as spiritual. The outcome has more to do with eternity than time. Your heavenly Father wants to make sure you don't give up your inheritance in heaven. But first He has work for you here below. As His Apostle Paul wrote in an earlier letter, "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*" (Galatians 6:9 NIV) Paul Harvey used to say, "Stand by for news!" God says, **Stand Firm for Triumph** – first...

✠ Sanctified by the Spirit (2:13-15)

Our greatest failures in life come from relying on ourselves. It may be as simple as thinking you became a Christian by your own will and decision. One guilt-ridden man told me how he gave his life to God ten times. He kept repeating altar calls at evangelism crusades. But the more times he went up, the more lost he felt. His experience was much like a mother and her two daughters who went to a similar crusade certain of their salvation until after the altar call. One daughter went up, the other stayed with her mother. Afterwards, the one who went up was no longer sure she was saved, nor her mother and sister.

But the Lord tells us how we can **Stand Firm for Triumph**. Learn who really does the choosing. Paul writes: "*We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth.*" This takes us back to eternity when God chose each of us by name to be the special objects of His divine grace to give the gift of faith. It had to be God's choice because the Lord also says of every Christian, "*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins....But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.*" (Ephesians 2:1,4f) "*Saved,*" made holy, sanctified, saints of God by faith.

The more you focus on God's work and God's choice, the more confident you are of your **Triumph**. We honestly confess with Luther in his explanation to the Third Article, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Isn't that exactly what the Holy Spirit says here through Paul? "*He called you to this [belief in the truth] through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Remember that game some of us played as kids? "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Mark right over." When you got the call, you'd run hard to break through the line on the other side – except if you wanted to stay there. Maybe the cool kids were on the other team. If you failed to break through, you could be on their side. Run hard, when God calls. You won't break through. He'll hold you safe with Him, **Sanctified by the Spirit**, so that you can "*stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you....*" God's work is solid and sure when the Holy Spirit uses His Word and sacraments to keep you...

✠ Strengthened by Jesus (2:16-17)

Many Christians in our country may find it hard to relate to new Christians in Muslim countries or in China where they are the first ones in their family to believe. Sometimes it means death threats and secret faith like Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night in John 3. Sometimes it means the new Christian is disowned by his family for not supporting the ancestors with sacrifices and gifts for the next world. Lonely is how a person would feel in such circumstances, except when he is **Strengthened by Jesus**.

Paul had every reason to pray especially hard for his dear friends back in Thessalonica. The first time he came there on his Second Missionary Journey, he and Silas had just escaped persecution in Philippi. Things went so well at first in Thessalonica, that within three weeks a new congregation had formed. Imagine that! It took two years for us to get “Mission Status” (1/1/1989) here at New Life. But three Sabbaths in the synagogue and Paul was blessed to gather a group of committed Jews with **“a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.”** You can guess what happened then. It happened nearly everywhere Paul went. Jealous Jews stirred up a mob riot, dragging Jason and other church leaders before city officials. False accusation flew of treason against the Roman Emperor. Paul and Silas’ had to flee at night, urged on by the brothers. (Acts 17:1-10)

Any veteran teacher would see the problem then. When bricks are missing from your foundation, faith can totter on ignorance, especially in hard times and persecution. All Paul could do was pray. And prayer is what the Thessalonians needed, prayer for God’s Word to work: **“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”** That’s how you **Stand Firm for Triumph**, not in your strength, but **Strengthened by Jesus** on God’s **“eternal encouragement and good hope.”** God didn’t just think of saving you yesterday. You can be sure His grace is good for tomorrow and forever – with all the saints to **Stand Firm for Triumph**. Jesus keeps you...

✠ Protected by God’s love (3:1-5)

“Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you.” My fellow pastors and I certainly felt the need for your prayers on our last trip to China. It seems that much political tension over religion has lessened in recent years, at least where we were traveling. But you never really know when some local official might just decide you’re not good for society, then send you back while persecuting your friends and loved ones. Might this explain why some Chinese Christians have such a hard time convincing their loved ones to believe?

But wait a minute! Didn’t we just learn today that’s the Holy Spirit’s work? Doesn’t He call people to faith through the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Sure, and isn’t that why Paul asks for prayers for the Gospel to be honored by others **“just as it was with you”**? Our society wants to believe that people are basically good. And naïve Christians sometimes fall for that, ignoring the fact that God’s Word says we are all under the curse of sin. We keep passing on our sinful birth defect just as we inherited it from our fathers all the way back to Adam. **“Not everyone has faith”** is an understatement, a reality check. The more we speak up for Christ, the more we need deliverance **“from wicked and evil men.”**

Our great Deliverer, Jesus Christ, is glad to keep us **Protected by God’s love**. He set us free from guilt and shame by taking ours on Himself. Talk about trustworthy! Who else would promise to suffer and die in agony for sinners like you and me? Jesus promised! Jesus died! Jesus rose! **“The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.”** **“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”** (Ephesians 6:12 NIV)

What Paul wrote to his dear Thessalonians is certainly my joy here too: **“We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.”** Isn’t **“God love”** what surpasses family love? And isn’t **“Christ’s perseverance”** what makes you never give up? **Stand Firm for Triumph!** Amen.