

Date of sermon: 6/22/2021
Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
Bible passage or verse: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12
Title of Sermon: Encouraging Words for Frightened Travelers
Series: Living in the Light of His Coming - #1

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: **2** Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **3** We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. **4** Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. **5** All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. **6** God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you **7** and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. **8** He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. **9** They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might **10** on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. **11** With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. **12** We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, one of the huge upsides of COVID is, it's got everyone talking about the return of Jesus. One of the upsides of the political situation in which we find ourselves is, it has everyone talking about the second coming of Jesus. One of the amazing upsides of this vaccine and the thought that it has some metallic metal in it that is inserting in you the mark of the Beast, and so, when you go through at Costco, you can shop there now because you have the mark of the Beast -- one of the exciting things about that is -- it has everyone talking about the second coming of Christ. One of the amazing upsides of this vaccine and the fact that it -- as one person said -- "can shed off of you and destroy the menstrual cycle of a woman who is standing next to you," is, it has everyone talking about the second coming of Jesus Christ. Do you get a trend? That's my last 18 months. It's been really amazing! But the upside of it is, even non-Christians are talking about the second coming of Christ. Why? Because Christians are going crazy. And they're talking about it.

I was on a property a little over a week ago, and it had three huge -- kind of like railroad cars. And I was asking this person, "What's that?" And they said, "Well, the previous owner thought that the end of the world was coming, and he had them buried." And I went and looked inside of them, and they were like doomsday, you know, machines. I mean -- they had fans inside and food and everything else. Now, in Colorado, where I used to live, the reality is, they had the same things, but it wasn't for doomsday -- it was for tornados. And whenever I'd go visit someone else hunting on their property, they'd always want to show me these things. "Hey, have you seen my new digs?" And they're not talking about their house! Their house -- most of them were trashed. But man, their underground systems were, like, the best in technology. Now, a completely different motivation, but the reality is the same. Now, this family -- we were talking, and I said, "Well, what do you think of that?" "Well, every man," he said, "People out here where they live" -- they live kind of way west -- "they're always talking about the end of the world and living off of the grid." And it's like -- "Wow. What do you think of that?" "I don't know."

It's a little bit like in a city where Kari and I used to live, there was a -- I think it was going to be a Walgreens or a Rite Aid or something like that, and it said, "Opening soon." And so, when we first moved there, we thought, "This is so cool. It's just around the corner from our house. Whatever it's gonna be, it's gonna be fun!" Then a year went by. "Opening soon." Well, you know, they're getting their financing together. And then, five years into it. "Opening soon." And do you know what I quit reading? The sign. Because ten years into it, they were still saying, "Opening soon." And there are a lot of people who are living in those two worlds. This recent activity of governmental control, and the vaccine, and everything else, has got a whole lot of people really fretted about -- this is the end. I feel it. And then, there are

other groups of people who simply see another sign -- "Coming soon." And they don't pay any attention to it. Well, there was a group of people that were as fretted as the church is in many ways today. It was the Thessalonians. And in fact, their concern was that some of them were whispering this thought that they had missed the return of Christ. And that they were gonna have to live through something horrible like the wrath of God. And they were fretted, and they were worried, and they thought God was displeased with them, and they were scared to death at the idea that Christ might have already come back and left them. And so, Paul wrote these words to this fretted group of people, much like I find today.

There are people who are over-the-top believing -- just get online, you've probably already seen it -- I don't have to tell you to get online. In fact, don't get online, it'll just waste your time. I've already had 500 hours wasted. And you will read everything about these things. But here's what you won't read -- you'll read speculation, you'll read fear, you'll read all kinds of things, but very few times will you read the Scriptures. And so, what we want to do is, we want to turn for the next five weeks to this passage that is written to a panicked church in light of the return of Christ. I absolutely believe Jesus Christ is going to return. I do! And yes, I'm in that camp that says I think it's sooner than later. Yes, I'm in that camp that believes the things that are happening are setting us up for the crescendo of God's work. And so, if that's true -- and I believe that it is -- then how do we live in light of His coming? I guarantee you, Jesus does not want you fearful, panicked, worried, bitter -- thinking that you've missed God. In fact, He wants you assured that God loves you, is pleased with you, and is going to use you.

See, that's what Paul writes to these folks. Why? Because their question was this -- "How can we be sure that God's pleased with us? I think we've missed the second coming of Christ! I think that maybe we're gonna have to go through some of that. I think maybe God is mad at us." And so, they were wondering. They were fearful, and they were asking those questions. There was a group of people -- it's a tribe -- and these folks invented something that I will never do unless my life or my wife's life depends on it. I will never jump from a bungee cord. I won't. Do you know where it started? It started with a group of people -- a new tribe, it's a tribal people -- and they used the bungee cord for a very specific thing. It wasn't actually a rubber cord; it was a vine. And what they would do is, if somebody was accused of something, caught doing something, whatever the case may be, they would confess their sins, and then they had to trial or test whether or not the confession was legitimate. You know how they tested it? You know! They put the person to the edge of a cliff, tied the vines around their leg, and -- POOO -- bon voyage! Kicked 'em over the edge. If they lived, God accepted their confession. If they didn't live, God didn't accept their confession. How sick is that? Almost as sick as individuals who need no acceptance of God and get up on a bridge and tie something around their ankles and jump off. If you've ever done it, God bless you. It's not on my bucket list. I think your bucket has holes, and maybe your head also, if you do this. I'm just telling you! I mean, why would anyone do this? But -- they had a question. And they had a question because historians, as they have studied religion, have come up with this law of retribution. And here's what the law, or the principle of retribution says. That God will treat you, or deal with you, in kind to your life and behavior. If your confession is good, God spares you. If your confession is bad, God's gonna kill you. You say, "Well, that's crazy! We would never do that!" Well, Christians do it all the time. The principle of retribution is all over the Christian church.

In the extreme, we see it in what? The name and claim that are the prosperity gospel. If God blesses your life, if God is, you know, loves you and God accepts you, He will prosper you and you'll have riches, and you're gonna be rich, and we know you're rich because why? God loves you and accepts you and you've prayed, et cetera, et cetera. On the other hand, if your business fails, if your marriage dissolves, if your children turn out to be, you know, something of the opposite political party that you are -- or whatever the case may be -- we know that God is displeased with you. We see it all the time. I hear it all the time. I hear people determining God's acceptance of them, God's love of them by circumstantial evidence. It happens in the church, in our church, all the time. It's called the principle of retribution. It's not just some tribe that jumps off the edge with their ankles tied to a vine -- it's Christians who are trying to

figure out the question, "Is God pleased with me?" Or, maybe in the reverse -- "Why did my business fail?" Or, "Why didn't God answer my prayer?" And when you begin to approach life that way, you begin to read the tea leaves, if you will, every day trying to figure out if God loves you and is pleased with you. I've got good news for you -- the principle of retribution is not something that God operates by. My leading case study and example -- the Book of Job. The Book of Job proves that that's not the way God relates to us. Romans chapter 3 proves that God doesn't relate to us that way. God says in Romans chapter 3 that no one is righteous, no, not one. No one seeks God. And if that's the case, if the law or the principle of retribution is actually the way God relates to you, then Romans 3 should and would condemn every one of us, starting with me.

If you look at the circumstances of your life, Thessalonian church, you may come up with the idea that God is displeased with you. Why? Because they were suffering. Because they felt like God had abandoned them. They were fearful they were going to approach or face the wrath of God. They felt like God had left them and chose others. They were experiencing extreme poverty. And out of all of that, they came to the conclusion that "God doesn't love us, God is not moving in our lives, we are faithless, we are loveless, and why should we exist. In fact, now we understand why God left us here on earth and took good believers to Heaven." What got them there? The same things sometimes that gets you there. That you fall into this really dark hole, feeling like God has given up on you, feeling like God is done with you -- maybe even feeling like God is mad at you. And Paul writes to you, and He wants to tell you how the Father feels about you. To do that, he helps them discover where they're doing well. That's where he starts. "We ought always to thank God for you." That's gotta shock 'em straight out of the beginning! They feel like a failure, they feel like God has left them, maybe abandoned them, maybe come and got the real church and left them behind, and Paul starts off, "I always thank God for you, brothers. And rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more."

What does Paul do? He helps them see where they're doing well. That's your assignment, my friends, to each other. It is -- that's your assignment to your children. That's your assignment to your wife. That's your assignment to your husband. That's your assignment to the people that you're mentoring. Because the vast majority of them live every day being bombarded by the accuser of the brethren -- that's Satan -- who's trying to tell them they're a failure, they aren't gonna make it, they aren't changing, they aren't loving well, they're not good dads, they're horrible mothers, they're -- and the list goes on. Every day, the enemy. And it seems like he has endless podcasts, that in a weird, strange way you tune in to every day. And so, God says to you and to me, "Help people discover where they're doing well." In what way? Number one, help them see where their faith is making a difference. "I thank God for you, brothers, because your faith is growing more and more." Pause for a minute. How do you think Paul knew that? How did he know it? He wasn't with them. He got this report from Timothy. Timothy brought this report back to the church at Thessalonica -- "Grace and peace to you from God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." "From Paul, Silas and Timothy." Well, how did Paul -- he wasn't with them. He wasn't hanging out with them. And by the way, faith is something that is abstract, it's something that you believe. So, how could Paul say "Your faith is growing"? Because, my friends, just like you, faith changes the way you make decisions. Faith changes the way you behave.

You remember those four friends who brought their friend to Jesus? You remember them? Four guys, each on a corner of the stretcher. And they were bringing their friend up to Jesus. He was lame, and they wanted Jesus to touch him and heal him. And -- I would love to know the conversation. The poor guy's probably lying on the stretcher, going, "Take me home! There's too many people! What are you guys doing? You're going to the top of the roof? You're gonna do what? You're gonna cut a hole in the roof? No! The guy's gonna make me pay for it! I don't have any money! I haven't worked in 30 years!" And I can imagine the four friends just saying, "Shut up! Just lay back there!" And they're marching him up there. Do you remember what Jesus said? Some of my favorite words of Jesus. "Seeing their faith." What? Yes. You see, sometimes your faith changes the way you talk. Sometimes your faith changes the way you handle difficult information. Sometimes your faith changes when an

order that you have put in needs to come in to your office and it doesn't come, and you don't fly off the handle, and you don't chew the messenger, and you don't get on the phone and read the riot act to the person who has exposed you. You see, that's what Paul heard. Paul heard from Timothy, "These folks are enduring some of the most difficult times, but they're not giving up." But when you're in the midst of it, oftentimes you don't attribute it.

I was talking this past week to a gentleman who didn't think he had much faith. He really didn't. But I listened to him talk about how he loved his kids, and how he prayed six and seven times a day when his wife, who was an alcoholic, was killing herself. And she eventually did. And he prayed and he prayed. And I looked at him. I said, "You know, you have a remarkable faith. You didn't shipwreck your life; you didn't scream at God." And then he goes, "Oh, I did. But I prayed. I prayed six or seven times a day. Sometimes it's the only way I got through." He didn't attribute that to himself as a great faith. He would not put himself up as a person of great faith, but he was. He held onto God. He loved those kids. He'd led them through some of the darkest days of their life. He gave them hope. He talked about the future of life being bright. How did he get there? When his wife was killing herself, he prayed. Sometimes you need to help people see where their faith is making a difference, and sometimes you need to identify how they've changed and matured, especially in their love. This is a church that wondered -- does God accept us? What does Paul say? "Because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing." What was that? Well, I heard about the fact that your house burned, and you faced a huge challenge, but five of the other family members from your church ran and put a new trailer on your property and delivered a bunch of food and wired a new freezer, and I heard about you guys.

I drove up the McKenzie this week and saw all of the burned-out -- and I was driving up there with a gentleman who knows that area exceedingly well. He was telling me, "Yeah, that family -- four families from the church, they took that family on." And -- "That family -- so tragic. They can't rebuild their house because they can't put a septic, so they lost their house and they can't get a permit to rebuild. But somebody's helping them to relocate." And I was astonished at the sadness of this dear brother's heart, and yet, at the hope. Why? Because there were people willing to love each other. There were people who were willing to sacrifice.

I heard a story this past week of a family in our church that drove -- I think it was something like six or seven hours -- just to be present for a funeral. Six, seven hours to drive to attend a service for an hour, to turn around and to drive back home. Who does that for a person they had just met? See, what Paul had heard of is the same thing I'm hearing of over and over and over again. It's helping people realize, your life is becoming so powerful in the way you love people. The gift you gave to that family, the sacrifice, the financial sacrifice, the time you gave to drive up the valley and to pour in and invest -- God is working powerfully in your life. Help people discover where they're doing well and help them to celebrate perseverance. I've never seen a football team that wins not know what to do. We know what to do when we win, don't we? I've never seen anyone -- tomorrow, they're going to, you know, celebrate the winner of the US Open -- golf. And I understand watching golf for most of you is like -- well, it's purgatory. I listened to it because I drove over for a funeral and drove back today, so I had three hours, and I listened to it for three hours. It was spellbinding. I know you can't imagine that, but it was! I had to make sure I kept my eyes on the road, it was so compelling. That's just a moment I had reminding myself of how delightful that was. But tomorrow there's gonna to be a winner. And he's gonna get a check, and it's gonna be a huge check. Like 1.3 million. And he's gonna get a big jug. And he's gonna be able to play in the US Open until he's 150. Or somewhere close to that. We know what to do when we win. Do we know what to do when we persevere?

Do we know what to do with a man who stays faithful to his wife when he hasn't received the same faithfulness from her? Do we know how to speak to a person who shows up and keeps showing up? Do we know what to do with a person who knows how to put their head down, and not duck, just simply

make it through? Paul does. He does. "Therefore, among God's churches, we boast about your perseverance and faith." You know what Paul does to perseverance? He brags about it. He goes around in all of his trips and he tells people, "I want to tell you how good the Thessalonian church is. They are enduring some of the most difficult times that you can ever imagine. And they're hanging in there. They're enduring, they're making it." Help people discover where they're doing well.

And secondly, help people believe in the promise of the great reversal. One of the challenges of injustice is that it gets to you, and the voices in your ear get to you, and they are like Asaph in Psalm 73: "What good does it do, God, for me to be faithful?" And so, Paul understands that one of the things you need to do when people face difficult times is to help them see the principle of the great reversal. What is it? "All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result, you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: and He will pay back trouble to those who have troubled you." God is just, and He will not allow injustice to go unpunished. How is that encouraging? It's because, when you understand that God doesn't let people get away with stuff, when you're treated poorly, when you're misunderstood, when you're accused, when somebody wrongly has an accusation against you, and when somebody slanders you, it hurts. But don't think they have the last word. They don't. God says injustice will never have the final word. In fact, God says that He will settle the score. He will. Those who spurn the gospel will, in the end, be brought to ruin. That's God's promise. Those who rise up against you -- what does He say? "All this is evidence. God is just, and He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you." Those who mock the gospel, those who say disparaging things against the church that believes that the Bible is the Word of God -- God won't let them get away with it. Those who say to you, "You believe that a man can actually survive in a whale? And what kind of fool are you? You believe that God could actually create out of nothing, and create all of the heavens and the earth in six days? You think God can -- what kind of anti-science individual are you?" All of those things pile up, and they just keep pounding at you. And this church was wondering, "God, does it make any difference to honor you?" And Paul helped them see God is just, and He will not allow it.

And not only those who spurn the gospel will be brought to ruin, but God will settle the score. How will He do that? Look at the text again. "And as a result, you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you suffer." My friends, when you honor God and you suffer for it, it puts you in a very, very select group of people. And that bond holds you together. It does. A number of years ago there was an earthquake in Mexico, and there were 19 babies that were spared in this earthquake, and the report of the show that I watched was these 19 babies who are now adults know each other, regularly get together and support each other. What would cause such a bond? Survival. When you survive something like that -- even though they didn't have much to do with it. The reality is, they experienced the survival of it. It bonded them together. It caused them to have an identity with each other. And that's what Paul is saying. The encouraging thing is, when you face trials and you endure and you sustain, there will be a bond and a care and a love for each other. I remember two weeks ago when brother Dan Barram was sharing about the difference he saw between Willamette University the day he started and today. And I remember him looking around and saying, "We're gonna need each other." You are. The darker it gets, the more you're going to need the Body of Christ. Why? Because we will suffer. We will be outsiders.

I've traveled a lot with missionaries. And this doesn't offend me at all, but when I'm with missionaries, I'm an outsider. Not because I'm not a believer with them -- I am a believer. But I haven't left my family, I haven't moved and learned a different language, I haven't heard the news that my mother died and I wasn't there. I didn't have to send my children to boarding school. And when I've been on these fields and these missionaries have gathered, they have a connection like I've seldom seen. Why? Because they're members of a unique set. As Paul says, they will be counted worthy for which they suffered. Help people believe in the promise of the great reversal. Whatever you suffer for Christ, it's worth it. Not just in Heaven, but it will put you in the context of a group of people called the church that will encourage you, will strengthen you and help you embrace your worthiness.

Finally, Paul says, affirm the good purposes of their heart. I don't find that a lot in the Christian church, to be quite candid with you. What I find more is people trying to convince me that their hearts are

wretched. "I have a sinful heart." "Pastor, I'm not --" Ah, no no no no. They don't read the Bible. They don't tell me the Bible. They're not using the Bible. They're just using the common language. The reality is -- let's look at what Paul says about these good people. "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you" -- verse 11 -- "that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours." What does he see? "That God will fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith." What's Paul telling them? "Folks, you guys got good hearts. You really do. Oh, you're not perfect. You just have good hearts. You care about wonderful things. You're marvelously sacrificial."

I got a letter this week -- a note -- came through one of our other pastors. Somebody heard the Vision last week, and they want to invest in kids. They believe in our school. "No strings attached -- here's a large sum of money." It's a large sum of money. "I want to see these kids grow up to love Christ." I got another letter this week, of a person who, when they were making out their will, "I want to invest it in this Vision. I want to invest it in this church and this Vision, this Vision to be a church for the city." They went to be with Jesus. I'm slightly jealous. But they loved you, and they loved this church. And they left you \$117,000, and said, "Go love this city." See, what Paul wants to do -- and I hope you will, too -- is that he chased around looking for the good purposes of people's hearts, and he told them. Does God love you and accept you? Oh, yes. My friend, I've seen your faith. It helped you endure a wife who killed herself and you didn't destroy your life, nor your kids'. You're doing really well. Does God accept you? Does He love you? Is He for you? Oh, yes. I've seen you grow and I've seen you mature in your love. I've watched you take your life and sacrifice your life and learn how to play the drums, and give -- when other teenagers are out there doing their own thing, you gave your time and life to this church. I love the way God's maturing you. I love the way God is growing you. Does God accept you? Does He love you? Is He working in your life? Oh, yeah. I believe in the good purposes of your heart, and I believe you're not about your selfish things -- I believe you're about kingdom things.

Live today as if your victory is assured. Why? Because it is. God is in love with you, and He has given you a new heart, and He is going to use you. Don't take the current difficulty and circumstances and in any way come to the wrong conclusion that God has left you. I see your faith. I see the way you're growing. I hear the intentions of your heart. I can't help but say, God is looking beautifully in your life. Be encouraged. That's God's Word to you. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, the only reason why we could ever say that is because you died, and your blood gave us life, and your forgiveness renewed us, and your Holy Spirit brought life to us. But when you did, you transformed us in the most miraculous way. Thank you for the faith that you've given to us, for the love that you are growing in us, and for the good hearts we see among us. And for that reason, I'm deeply encouraged to watch this church live in the light of your coming. Candidly, Lord Jesus, come soon. But until you do, may you find us faithful. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

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