

## THE BELOVED COMMUNITY



2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Tenth Message

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SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Happy Lunar New Year: it's out with the Rat, in with the Ox. I'm sure that many of you celebrated the New Year on Friday.

Happy Valentine's Day. This day is significant for me because on this day in 1985 I flew from London to SFO to start a new job the next day at the Stanford accelerator. I thought I was coming for 18 months, but I'm still here 36 years later, albeit no longer at SLAC. Prior to boarding I bought a newspaper to read during the flight. This was before mobile devices and seat-back screens, when the only entertainment was reading. As I made my way through the *Times* I found that the center four pages were devoted to Valentine's Day messages. I was surprised: the newspaper does not seem an obvious place to post a Valentine. How do you know your Best Beloved is going to see it? Do they know to look? Will they persevere in looking through many hundreds of messages to find the one addressed to them? And how are they sure it really is addressed to them? This seems an unreliable way to confess your true love.

In her children's message, Lisa reminded us that God loves us and he tells us so in the Bible. This is his Valentine's message, his love letter to us. In the children's song, Christine sang, "Jesus loves me this I know." How do we know this? "For the Bible tells me so." The Bible tells us clearly that God is Love, that God loves us, and that he wishes to draw us into his love, into his warm embrace. This isn't tucked into the inside section of a newspaper. It's in the Bible for all to read. And yet, many miss this message. Some of us may still struggle with the message that God is love. Some of us are stuck on a judgmental God.

Prior to this Thessalonian series, I preached through the tabernacle section of Exodus (chap. 25-40). I did this so that over and over again I could proclaim the Lord's name:

**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exod 34:6-7 NIV)**

I never tire of saying that. But too many people don't know that this is in the Bible. They don't know God is like this.

God is Love. Love requires three things: the lover, the beloved, and the love itself. We can apply this to the triune God, as did the Church Fathers. The Father is the lover. The Son is the Best Beloved. And the Spirit is the love that flows back and forth between them. The Father loves the Son. The Son basks in that love and returns the love to the Father. It is a community of perfect love: Father, Son and Spirit. Within this beloved community God is completely fulfilled; he has no need of another. Nevertheless, in generosity God shares his love in creation and in redemption. In love he sent his Son into the world. At the baptism and the transfiguration Jesus heard these wonderful words from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased." Doesn't everyone long to hear these words: "You are my beloved; in you I am well pleased"?

But often we doubt God's love. We don't feel like the beloved.

This is true during this time of pandemic. If God truly loves us, why is he allowing us to suffer? Why doesn't he make it go away? We just want it to get better. Do you feel that way? On this Valentine's Day are you doubting God's love?

It seems that the Thessalonian Christians were doubting God's love. They were suffering persecution and trouble at the hands of those who opposed the gospel. They were interpreting this suffering as God's judgment on them. They feared that God was against them, not for them. They were afraid that on the future Day of the Lord, when God would settle things up, they would receive divine judgment not salvation. Paul responded to that fear in his first letter. He assured them, "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that...we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another" (1 Thess 5:9-11).

Now, as seen in the second letter, they are afraid that the Day of the Lord has actually arrived (2 Thess 2:1-2). Someone, claiming Paul's authority, is asserting that God has arrived in judgment. Presumably their current suffering is indicative of this judgment. What pastoral counsel does Paul give to address their fear? As we saw last week, he first gave them the big picture of a cosmic conflict (2:3-12). Their persecutors refused to accept the gospel of truth. They have fallen prey to the Lie, and thus are delighting in wickedness, notably the wickedness of persecution. The persecution of the Christians is not due to God's displeasure and judgment, but due to the wickedness of those who have rejected the truth.

Having given this big picture, Paul now turns to his pastoral counsel for the Christians. These final verses of chapter 2 are part of his answer to the crisis. There wasn't enough time to cover them last week, but they are well worth looking at on their own.

### 1. The Lord's Beloved (2:13-17)

**But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.**

**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. (2 Thess 2:13-17)**

Paul reminds them that they are the Lord's beloved. They matter to God. God has chosen them and God has called them. There are two aspects to this calling unto salvation: a divine side and a human side. These are indicated by parallel statements in vv. 13-14.

On the human side, they have been called unto salvation

“through belief in the truth” and “through our gospel.” Paul preached the gospel in their city; they heard it as good news; they accepted it and believed unto salvation. In contrast, those now persecuting them refused to believe; they did not welcome that same gospel whereby they might be saved. They rejected the truth and stayed in the Lie.

On the divine side is the sanctifying work of the Spirit preparing them to share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has called them, the Spirit is at work transforming them, and they will participate in Christ’s glory.

When the Thessalonians received the gospel in faith they entered into the Beloved Community. They were drawn into the divine love as the Lord’s beloved. They entered God’s family as his children. They entered a new human family, the Beloved Community, in which they were brothers and sisters together, united by a bond stronger even than physical family. The believers in Thessalonica were a beloved community. They were also part of a larger beloved community throughout the Mediterranean world.

Repeatedly Paul addresses his readers as brothers and sisters: 21 times in these two short letters alone. The New Testament letter writers also frequently address their readers as Beloved. Paul describes many of his coworkers as beloved, including “Luke the beloved physician” and “Timothy my beloved child.” In his first letter to the Thessalonians he writes that they have become his beloved (1 Thess 2:8).

God is love. God loves us. We matter to God. We are part of the divine happiness. The eternal God is eternally happy within the relational fulness of the Godhead. But in generosity he draws us in, making us an ingredient in his happiness. He draws us into his glory. The Biblical story begins with God in eternal glory. It ends with God and his people in eternal glory. In the gospel we are invited into this glory, that we might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the end, when God spreads his glory over us, he will beam on us with pleasure and approval and say what he said to Jesus, “You are my beloved son/daughter; in you I am well pleased.”

How do we know that we are part of this Beloved Community? It is not by our circumstances. The Thessalonians interpreted their suffering as indication of God’s displeasure, as his judgment on them. But Paul reminded them in his first letter that the Beloved Community is also a fellowship of suffering. At the head of this fellowship stands Jesus who himself suffered. Following him in suffering are the churches of Jerusalem and Judea, which the Thessalonians are now imitating. They in turn are serving as a model for the other churches of Greece and Macedonia in their suffering. The reality is that often the Beloved Community is this fellowship of suffering.

We are suffering under the pandemic, but this suffering is not because we belong to the Beloved Community. The pandemic is afflicting people throughout the world, Christian or not. But we can face the suffering together as a beloved community. Thanks to all of you who are working to maintain our bonds through this difficult season: the deacons with their Circle of Care; the children’s ministry with its Adopt-a-Family, and this afternoon’s Valentine’s Drive-thru.

How do we know that we are part of the Beloved Community? Because the Bible tells us so. But we need to be reminded of this over and over again. So we gather on Sunday mornings to pay attention to God, to remind ourselves who he is, what he is doing in Christ, and what he is continuing to do through his Spirit. And we remind ourselves who we are in relation to him and to one another. We are

his beloved and we are the Beloved Community. During the pandemic we cannot meet in person, but we can still meet virtually to remind ourselves of these truths.

Having reminded the Thessalonians that they are the Lord’s beloved, that God is for them, Paul finally gives them a specific exhortation: stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught, either by our word or by our letter (2:15). Stand firm! They have been shaken out of their wits by this claim that the day of the Lord has already come. Instead of being shaken, they should be firm, reassured by Paul of these two things. Their suffering is part of a cosmic conflict, the outcome of which is not in doubt. And they are God’s beloved, despite the fact that they are suffering.

Secondly, they should hold fast to the traditions they have been taught. Or rather, it is by holding fast to the traditions they have been taught that they will be able to stand firm. Tradition has a bad rap these days. The eminent church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously wrote, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”<sup>1</sup> Traditionalism is saying “we’ve always done it this way,” without knowing why. This is illustrated by Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*: “You may ask, why did this tradition get started? I’ll tell you why—I don’t know. But it’s a tradition.” Then he breaks into the wonderful song “Tradition.”

But Tradition itself is something different. It is literally that which is handed over. It is received from the previous generation, preserved in the current generation, and passed on to the next generation. It is the apostolic teaching proclaimed in the cities of the Roman empire, taught in the young churches, and written down in what became the New Testament. The Thessalonians had been taught in person by Paul when he was in their city, and they had been taught by him through letter, what we know as First Thessalonians, to which is now being added this second letter. The tradition is summarized in super-condensed form in the creeds. “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...And in one Lord Jesus Christ...who for us and our salvation was made human. For our sake he was crucified...And in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life.” Many churches recite this every week. This can be mindless traditionalism. But it can also be rich remembrance that God is for us in Christ through his Spirit.

By holding to the truth they have been taught they will be able to stand firm; they will be able to resist being shaken. We encounter situations in life that can shake us. I know that some of you are shaken by the pandemic and the prolonged isolation from one another.

In 1978 there was a terrible vehicle accident in Thailand. A truck plowed into a minibus, killing five missionaries and seven of their children. These were my parents’ colleagues. They all lived in the same small town. How can Christians face such shocking tragedy without being shaken? The General Director of the mission, in Singapore, sent a telegram: “Don’t allow questions you can’t understand to detract you from the glorious certainties you already know.” These were wise and comforting words.

We won’t necessarily know why suffering occurs. But we do know that we are God’s beloved and that ahead lies our participation in God’s glory. The Thessalonians wouldn’t necessarily have answers to all their questions, but Paul assures them of what they do know: they are God’s beloved. God is for them not against them.

There is no correlation between lack of suffering and happiness. The USA is constitutionally committed to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Yet there are many unhappy people. They

might have health, wealth and prosperity but still lack happiness. Conversely, those without health, wealth and prosperity can be very happy. One of the values of mission trips is encountering people who have so little yet are full of joy. Many of you have been on these trips to King City, Mexicali, Yucatan, Liberia and other places. These trips explode the myth that happiness comes with prosperity.

Two of the most joyful people I have met have endured great suffering. In 1986 I met a nuclear physicist from China. He came to know Christ as a graduate student at Berkeley in the early 1950s then went back to China, knowing that it was going to be difficult. There was no news of him for thirty years, until finally a letter arrived in Hong Kong. I met him here then visited him in his home in Beijing in 1987. He had suffered terribly in the Cultural Revolution, but his face was radiant; he was full of joy.

In 1996 at Regent College I took a class from Marva Dawn. I quickly realized that though I might forget what she taught I would never forget her. She had multiple physical ailments, but was a supremely joyful woman. In all the books she has written she capitalizes the word Joy. One of these books is *Joy in Our Weakness*, written out of her own struggles with chronic illness. Both of these people expose the lie that happiness requires the absence of suffering. They both did more than endure suffering. They were filled with Joy. They knew that they belonged to the Beloved Community.

The Thessalonian Christians belong to this community. Therefore, Paul ends with a wish prayer for them:

**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. (2:16-17)**

May God in Christ, who has already given them eternal encouragement and good hope in the gospel, encourage them further through the ongoing work of his Spirit in their lives. May God encourage them to persevere in hope, to faithfully endure their present suffering. May this be true for us also as we continue to endure the pandemic.

And Paul prays that God would strengthen them in every good deed and word so that their current lives would be faithful. He doesn't want them to simply passively endure their suffering, but to be active in good deeds and good words. He wants them to be outward looking, engaging with others in word and deed.

The prayer for encouragement looks back to the crisis of chapter 2, the believers' fear aroused by false teaching. The prayer for strengthening in good work looks ahead to yet another crisis facing the Thessalonian church. We will look at this crisis next week. Meanwhile, the first five verses of chapter 3 prepare the Thessalonians to hear Paul's counsel concerning the crisis.

## 2. Direction into the Love of God (3:1-5)

**As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. 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. (3:1-5)**

Because they are part of the Beloved Community alongside Paul, he invites them to participate with him in the work of the gospel. He

asks that they pray that the gospel may spread rapidly. But as the gospel advances it meets with two diametrically-opposed responses. There will be those who will respond like the Thessalonians: they welcome the gospel as what it is, good news. They respond in faith and enter the Beloved Community. But there will be those who refuse to welcome the gospel, who refuse to hear it as good news. They respond in opposition to the message and the messenger. They oppose the Beloved Community. Paul invites the Thessalonians to pray for both responses: pray that people will honor the gospel, that they will respond in faith unto salvation. And pray that Paul would be delivered from those who oppose the gospel, those who are in the thrall of the Lie.

Not everyone responds to the gospel in faith. There is opposition. But through it all God is faithful. Paul has already prayed that God strengthen the Thessalonians in every good deed and good word. Now he expresses his confidence that God will strengthen them and protect them from the evil one. This does not necessarily mean the end of their suffering. God will bring them through their suffering, not necessarily snatch them out of their suffering. God will protect them from the evil one because he has redeemed them out of the realm of the evil one. He has brought them into his beloved community. God is faithful. Therefore Paul is confident that the Thessalonians will be faithful, that they already are doing and will continue to do the things which he has commanded.

In his first letter he praised "your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 1:3). He is confident that they will continue in this, persevering in their affliction.

Paul ends this short section with another wish prayer: that the Lord would direct their hearts into the love of God and the perseverance of Christ.

How can we facilitate the Lord directing our hearts into the love of God? How do we cultivate our religious affections? How do we stimulate and nourish our appetite for God? This is the work of spiritual formation. There are two aspects to the love of God: God's love for us and our love for God. We have to begin with God's love for us. How can we allow God to direct our hearts into his love? By reading Scripture which tells us of his great love. By singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs that tell of his great love. By giving thanks with grateful hearts for his great love. Our growing appreciation of God's love for us should then intensify in us our love for him.

For many years my father taught a Bible school for lepers in Thailand. They had nothing but time and hearts full of gratitude. They had heard the gospel from people like my mother, a nurse who went out into the villages to treat lepers. In the gospel they heard that God loved even them. They responded in faith and joined the Beloved Community. Later my father started a home bible seminary for simple farmers and fishermen which he ran for many years. Eventually he taught at Bangkok Bible College, but he much preferred teaching the lepers and the farmers. They had time to meditate on God, and they were full of gratitude. It was easier to direct their hearts into the love of God.

I now have the privilege of studying and teaching Scripture here at PBCC. The goal is not information, nor is it principles for life. The goal is direction into the love of God. One of our four family values is Devotion to the Word. The Word should lead us to devotion to Christ who "loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:2). Devotion to the Word should lead us into an all-consuming love relationship with our Lord.

Secondly, how can we facilitate the Lord directing our hearts into the perseverance of Christ? Again there are two aspects: Christ's own perseverance and our following his pattern in our perseverance. Again we turn to the Scriptures to read of Christ's perseverance. We read of him "who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." We read of him who "for the joy set before him endured the cross" (Heb 12:2). So, we find encouragement to faithfully endure.

Love is at the beginning, the middle, and the end of today's passage. We are the Lord's beloved. May God who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word. And may the Lord direct our hearts into the love of God and the perseverance of Christ.

Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Happy Valentine's Day, Beloved Community.

*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 in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess 3:12-13)*

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

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