

A graphic featuring the word "STEADFAST" in a large, white, sans-serif font, centered within a white double-lined circle. The circle is surrounded by a dotted white line. Two white 'X' marks are positioned diagonally across the circle, one in the upper right and one in the lower left. The background is a gradient of orange and brown.

STEADFAST

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is stand still. The pressures of life and society, the pain and struggle we experience, can make us shaky in our faith. When you are holding on to the last rung of the ladder, be encouraged and stand firm. Christ is faithful to you and will help you remain steadfast in Him.

We had a great weekend with Don Everts here last week, didn't we? I was watching Don preach online, and I had that feeling like I wish I had warned him a little more. We gave him the schedule and how we run back and forth to preach four times and all of that, but there are just these little idiosyncrasies you think, "Oh, I probably should have warned him." You know that feeling, like when you loan someone your car and it has a few little tricks? I've told you about my Jeep that I had to park downhill to start. I remember loaning it, I think to my Mom, and this was way before cell phones. It just made me think, "Oh, I probably should have mentioned." Our passage today is a little like that. I probably should have mentioned. The Thessalonian letters are some of the earliest New Testament writings, this one probably from 50 AD. Very early. But some major misunderstandings were already popping up. So, there were a few more things the Spirit put on Paul's heart, things along the lines of "Oh, I probably should have mentioned."

The church was struggling with rising persecution, they were confused about the "Day of the Lord," and finally, some in the church were so convinced Jesus was returning soon, they were quitting their jobs and living in the basement, as an act of faith—a super-spiritual couch protest. This isn't lazy, this is holy! But that's not how God calls us to act. We don't know when Jesus is coming back and in the meantime, we are called to be faithful, to be steadfast. How are you steadfast when everything around you is slipping? From last week, "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. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance (steadfastness) and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring" (2 Thessalonians 1:3–4). How are you steadfast? Your faith is growing. Over time, the trust you have in Jesus proves true again and again, and the roots of faith grow deeper. Steadfast. Not only faith but love. Love for one another. I wonder if you have thought about this. Your ability to hang tough, your ability to remain steadfast, it isn't just about you. Your success or failure at holding fast to the faith of Jesus Christ is tied in some way to your increasing love for those around you here in First Pres and in the community of Christ-followers. Do you look at the people down your row any differently now? Your rootedness, your faithfulness, your steadfastness, and mine, it's tied to how we love one another. But there are forces ripping at all these roots.

Between the first letter Paul sent and the second, a fake letter came saying the Day of the Lord had already

happened and they missed it. Some of you remember the Left Behind series. The believers were taken up to heaven, "raptured", and the rest of the group found themselves still around. Huh. This was a little different. Actually, what was happening here was they had great hope in the Day of the Lord. They had great hope in a day that was coming when God would set all things right, those who always get away with it wouldn't get away with it anymore, those who abuse others or hurt kids or steal or whatever, they would get what was coming and the evil would end. The false letter said that Day had already happened and God decided not to fix all the things that need fixing, so get used to it, this is as good as it gets. Do you see? Listen, if this is as good as it gets, we're all a little disappointed. There's something wrong in the world and it needs fixing, and I can't tell you much, I can't see the future, and I can't decode even all this mysterious writing in front of us this morning about exactly what the Day of the Lord is going to look like. But I can say this, God is not done. What's broke ain't fixed yet! It's still coming.

So, Paul says hold fast. Stay faithful. Be steadfast. Hold on to Jesus; Jesus is holding on to you. There's an old saying, "An oak tree is just an acorn that held its ground." A tree is just a nut that stuck to it. What we need is to be just nuts enough, just nuts enough to hold on to this soil when everything is pushing us off. Hold on to Jesus; Jesus is holding on to you. How many movies have you seen where the hero reaches over and grabs the person who is falling, and they clasp arms, "I've got you!" But the one falling can't hold on, "I can't hold it. I'm losing my grip." But, you know, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, he's not going to let you fall. He grabs on tight and heaves! Jesus, in this case, is Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Hold on to him. He's holding on to you.

We can't draw a map of the end times or hand out an agenda for the Day of the Lord, but we can know that it is on the way, and we can hang on. That's where the Scripture is today. It is very clear, uncomfortably clear at points, that there is a day coming when we will be separated out. Some for eternal life with God and others for eternal separation from God. As a friend said to me last week, "I'm trying to tell my grandkids, you are eternal. You will live forever. That can be very good news or very bad news." The afterlife will either be spent with God, or apart from God, and the descriptions we have of eternal life separated from God are not pretty. Between the ascension of Jesus and His return, there is a time of deciding. In that time, the Spirit of God is at work convincing hearts and building faith. But in that time other forces are at work too, ripping at the roots,

attempting to dislodge your faith, poison your love for one another and for your church, make evil sound good and make good sound evil. When I say there is wind blowing, pushing you off the ground of faith, this is what I mean. We need to hold on, to stand firm, to be steadfast against evil forces that try to dislodge our faith, poison our relationships and confuse our minds.

There are three primary forces at work ripping at the roots: the flesh, the world and the devil. The flesh is that part of us that still resists the reign and rule of Jesus. Sometimes out of habit or out of self-gratification or out of fear, or out of willful disobedience, we allow the flesh to drive the ship. "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" (2 Thessalonians 1:11). Let every desire, let every deed, be not for you, but for Him who saved you. Then in our passage today, do not be "easily unsettled or alarmed" by things somebody said we said (verse 2). Verse 3: "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way." Don't "let" it says. That's important. Your flesh allows the deception because there is something in the lie your flesh prefers to the reign of Jesus. Don't let. Be steadfast. Hold on to Jesus; Jesus is holding on to you.

The world. Are we supposed to love the world or resist the world? Both. This Scripture outlines the way the world can push against you and rip at the roots. There is a lot of mystery surrounding the "man of lawlessness" and what it refers to. I want to focus more on the spirit of lawlessness. "For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed" (2 Thessalonians 2:7-8). I get the image of a dam holding back the floods of evil, don't you? There is a spirit of lawlessness. A force. God is holding that force back from accomplishing all it otherwise would. God is holding it back for a season. When it is released, all the power will be focused on a particular person, but let's take it today as a personification. If all the lawlessness of the world was a person, it would look like this. But the spirit of lawlessness is pervasive. The world is ripping at the roots.

The flesh, the world and the devil. Yes, the Scriptures name an opponent: Satan. There is an opponent in spiritual places actively working to destroy your life. He does it through lies. The only power Satan has is deception, the only thing he can do is lie to you. It's when you believe the lie that the damage is done. "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance

with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved" (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). It does no good to pretend the devil doesn't exist. In 2 Corinthians it says to forgive others, rush to forgive others in the church, "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:11). But sometimes I think we are unaware. We live as though there is no threat at all, instead of, as Peter said, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Jesus knew he was real. He faced him down. Jesus named his motivations: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10).

There are forces at work to wreck your life, to steal, to kill, to destroy. Their weapons are lies and confusion. They rip at the roots. The flesh, the world and the devil conspire, and you need to know they are there. The worst thing in the world is to drift down the river unaware that around the bend is a huge waterfall, and hostile forces waiting to pounce. But listen to me now, these dark forces do not win. They have already been defeated. The only power Satan has is the power to deceive. If you believe the lie, you give him power. But there is no question of who is more powerful. Look at verse 8: "And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8). With the breath of His mouth He blows the evil away. The splendor, the glory of His very presence, is enough to blast darkness from the room. If you are in Christ today, if you stand with Jesus, the only power these dark forces have is the power you give them to keep you deceived. If the truth comes, when the truth comes, into your mind, into your heart, the evil forces, they're over. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). We know how Satan works. He does all he can to promote the lies. But the life Jesus won for you, He will deliver, and no petty liar is going to stop him.

It's hard to escape the lies. They just keep coming. How are lies dispelled? By truth. Where can we find truth? God's Word. Not our best opinions. Not our anecdotal experiences. Not the blog post we read. The Word of God is always true. The Word of God, rightly understood, it is always true. When the whole world is shifting sands, the Word of God is a solid place to stand. I was thinking the other day about the first time I was exposed to the really difficult questions, the tough ques-

tions. What does God have to say about dating? What about intimacy before marriage? Abortion? What does God say about money? What about the environment? Does God care how we use the planet? By the time I was sorting through these tough questions, I already trusted this Word. Why? Because this Word had introduced me to Jesus. Not only the historical figure, but the personal Savior. I had met Him, felt His love, known His grace and forgiveness, and so I trusted His Word. Then I sorted through those questions from a position of trust. (Mostly in Dave and Susan Strehlow's living room on Thursday mornings before high school in a Bible Study for Young Life. Sometimes with pancakes!) Truth dispels falsehood. God's Word is truth.

What about God sending a delusion in verse 11? Is God an author of lies? No. Look at the full passage, "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (2 Thessalonians 2:9–12). Those who are perishing are perishing because they have believed the lie, refused the truth and delighted in wickedness. But what does it mean that God sends a delusion? Because they have turned their backs on God, the more light God sheds on them, the darker their view. The Puritans had a saying, "The same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay." If your heart is postured humbly before God, His grace will melt your heart. If you are postured pridefully away from God, He keeps sending the wind of His grace even though it is, just now, pushing you away. Take it as a conviction, as an encouragement. Turn around.

When it feels that evil forces are ripping at the roots, you're right. They are. But they can't win. They won't win. They already lost. Christ allowed the force of evil to fire all it had at Him. All it had. Guns blazing. Until the artillery was spent, the ammunition emptied, the cannons smoking and locked up overheated. And He died, on the cross. And He rose again from the dead. Yes, there are forces ripping at the roots. They only have the power we give them when we walk along in their lies. When the truth comes, the lie ends. When the light comes, the darkness ends. When the risen Lord comes into your heart, the sickness that leads to death ends, and the life of Jesus Christ holds you steadfast.

STUDY GUIDE

STEADFAST • "Ripping at the Roots"

2 Thessalonians 2:1–12

UP: UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word¹

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12.

- 1) Paul writes to people who are anxious about false claims that Jesus had already returned. Describe a time in your faith journey when you have found yourself confused. How did you work through that situation or question?
- 2) Read verses 3–4. The Roman emperor Caligula had attempted to erect a statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem to be worshipped shortly before Paul wrote this letter. Paul knows things will only get worse. As you think about our world, where do you see "lawlessness"? Where do you see the continuation of the trajectory that Paul describes?
- 3) Reread verses 5–10. People often try to use these verses to predict the second coming of Christ. More appropriate is to draw encouragement from Paul's proclamation that there will be a time when Jesus will return and bring God's justice.¹ How might these verses encourage you in the season of life you are currently in?
- 4) Reread verses 11–12. God will ultimately hand people over to the lies that they are delighted to believe. This is an encouragement for those in Thessalonica who are anxious about the return of Christ as the signs of Christ's return will be obvious. When are you most tempted to believe the lies of Satan?
- 5) How might this passage encourage you to grow in faith, love and perseverance in a difficult season of life?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Throughout the fall we've prayed for individuals in our lives who don't know Jesus. Take time to pray again for this person to be open to the Gospel.

IN: Connect with Each Other

Who in your life is experiencing a difficult time? Give them a call and offer to pray with them over the phone.

¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone Galatians and Thessalonians*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 148–149.