

A graphic featuring the words "STEADFAST" in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a white double-lined circle. The circle is surrounded by a dotted white border. Two white lines cross each other diagonally, once in the upper right and once in the lower left, framing the central circle. Two horizontal white lines are positioned above and below the text.

# 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.

## STEADFAST • 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5 • Tim McConnell • November 17, 2019

Last week we learned, “Hold on to Jesus; Jesus is holding on to you.” When we don’t know if we can hang on, guess who is sure He can? This week the letter takes us a little deeper. Our perseverance, our ability to hang on and hold fast, our ability to stand steadfast, it depends on our connection with Jesus Christ. Are you connected? From time to time I travel somewhere to speak, or I travel from somewhere to speak here to you guys, and I need to work on my notes on an airplane. Now, a lot of the work I do and the sermon notes and slides and things are stored in the cloud. But I have a confession to make. I don’t really always know if my files are on my laptop or in the cloud. I’ll go to open something and have this fear rush over me: Do I need to be on WiFi to get that? I truly don’t know. I think a lot of you can relate. Am I connected here or not? To some of you, that makes me sound young. But to a lot of others (like much of my staff), that confession makes me sound like the helpless old dude. Well, maybe so. But I’ll tell you this, I sure programmed a few VCRs in my day. Never missed a recording. Are you connected? Your ability to run the race all the way to the end depends not on your strength, but on Christ’s perseverance.

At no point in the Christian life does Jesus turn to you and say, “Okay, from here you’re on your own. From here it’s all up to you. Good luck.” At no point from beginning to end does it all depend on you. It just doesn’t. This is hard to grasp. We are so used to everything depending on us we find it hard to understand when it all depends on God. In fact, there’s something in us that wants to be independent. There is something in us that reacts against being dependent on anyone or anything else, even God. But we are. Some would say that the root of all sin is our desire to be autonomous and independent from God. I’m my own man. I’m my own woman. I make my own choices and I bear my own consequences. I am the master of my fate. Not exactly. If you want to make it through, you will need a firmer foundation. To be steadfast, hide, rest, trust in, hold on to, connect with, Christ’s perseverance.

“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” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). There is some important naming going on in this verse, along with some critical insight into salvation. Naming. We always thank God for you, brothers and sisters, family, fellow children of God, who are what? “Loved

by the Lord.” Beloved. That’s your name: Beloved. “Because God chose you,” God drew near to you, God befriended you and declared himself your friend. Chosen. God chose you as firstfruits. Don’t think of that as God going down the produce aisle and picking the best apples off the top of the pile. No. God’s grace in loving and choosing you is that you are now an inspiration to those who follow behind. “If God’s grace can save Tim, well I’m sure it can reach me.” Chosen as firstfruits, “to be saved.” To be saved. Do we save ourselves? No, we are saved, as passive as a child who was born, or a drowning man who was pulled from the water. By God’s grace we are saved. It’s the sum of the Gospel: Jesus saves. In fact, that’s the meaning of the very name “Jesus.” It means “God saves.” We are saved. So, pause there. What are the names we carry? “Beloved.” “Chosen.” “Saved.” “First Fruits.” First of many.

Keep going, “...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” (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14). How are we saved? Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief. Let’s get deep here. Contact with God is impossible apart from Jesus. Only because Jesus died on the cross is it possible for us to receive the Spirit, to be in contact with God, the Holy and Divine Lord God Almighty. When we are steeped in sin, we can’t come into contact with the holiness of God. It would snuff us out like light snuffs out darkness. But because Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins, we can have contact with God through Him. That means we can have the power of the Spirit of God at work in us. We are not separated eternally, but united through Christ’s sacrifice. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit, and what does the Holy Spirit do? It makes things holy. When it comes into our lives, it “sanctifies,” it makes us holy. First by declaring the truth of our justification and forgiveness to our hearts, then by working in our lives to change our desires and habits and actions and convictions, to make our lives better. But we are saved as soon as we come home to God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. God doesn’t work on us to see if we can be good enough; He doesn’t polish the apple then decide it’s good enough to keep. We are justified and saved for eternal life at the very first instant.

What happens at the very first instant? You believe in the truth. You are saved through the sanctifying

work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. Now we are getting into that great mystery of salvation. Did I do it or did God do it? There are two levels here, and they are well represented in these two verses. The Spirit is at work, and you believe. When you are facing front, the way we experience this is, "I choose to believe in Jesus. I believe in Jesus. I trust Jesus. I give my life to Jesus. Because of that, I am saved." But then we walk forward a little and look back on that moment, and we realize, I thought I was this autonomous, independent being, but back then, God saved me. Like a drowning puppy yanked from the river. God reached down and saved my soul. I have no reason to boast! Nothing to pat myself on the back about. I was saved. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Some of you as we sit this morning are at a position of deciding, do I trust Jesus? That's right. It's yours to decide. You decide. One day you might look back, if you take His hand, and you'll see another layer going on. God's love was after you all along.

We better roll on! Two verses in. "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" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). "So then," on that basis, because of that, as a conclusion to the truth we have just established, therefore: stand firm. Be steadfast. Do you see that? How can I possibly keep steadfast? Does it all depend on me? "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 Thessalonians 2:16–17). Does it all depend on me? How about turn to, and trust in, God to do it?

Chapter 3: "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" (2 Thessalonians 3:1). Paul says, pray for us that we would share this message. See, if the message doesn't go out, there is no truth to be believed. If the gospel doesn't get shared, and shared well, there is no word in which for people to put their trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, there is no message of faith for the Holy Spirit to pull someone's mind and heart through back to God. If we don't share the gospel, the whole thing stops. We are part of the work of salvation when we obediently and passionately and clearly share the message of salvation. But can we save anyone? No. The

Holy Spirit pulls souls up into the boat through the message we have the privilege of sharing. So pray for us. That it may happen. That it may catch fire and spread, like wildfire, across the city. And pray that we are not caught up by wicked people (verse 2). But we're not too worried about that. Why? "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" (2 Thessalonians 3:3–4). The Lord is faithful. We have confidence in the Lord.

So then, finally, the last verse: "May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance" (2 Thessalonians 3:5). For those who keep track of such things and write words in your Bible margins, it's "May God direct your hearts into the agape love of God and the hupomone steadfastness of Christ." We heard about that word two weeks ago. Hupomone. Perseverance. Steadfastness. Though the weight is heavy, our knees don't give. We hold on. But our hearts need direction. When the weight is suddenly heavy, our hearts will run all kinds of directions. Tuesday morning a dear friend and pastor called stressed out by a sudden departure on the church staff. He said, "Tim, if I'm honest, what my heart wants to do is run away." Hang on. Be steadfast. Though the weight is heavy, your knees don't give out. That same morning a friend here at church stopped me in the hall. She runs one of our Caring Ministries, and she said, "Pastor, can you give me some encouragement? I'm tired from leading this." I was caught a little on my heels and didn't do as good a job at encouraging her as I wished I had, but the message was the same. Hang in there. Be steadfast. Though the weight is heavy, your knees won't give out. Lord, direct our hearts to lean on You. Direct our hearts into the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.

Eric Liddell won the gold medal for running the 400 meters in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. But the funny thing is, he never trained for it. He trained for the 100 meters. That's the race he was going to run, but when the schedule came out Eric saw that his race was on a Sunday. In his heart was a deep conviction that Sunday was a day given to the Lord, not to competition and sports. He would be in church. So he withdrew his name. But then he was invited to run the 400 on another day. Out of the blocks, he ran so fast they thought he would kill himself, and he kept running that fast all the way around. He broke the record and took the gold. Eric was asked how he did it, and this is what he said: "The secret

of my success over the 400 meters is that I run the first 200 meters as fast as I can. Then, for the second 200 meters, with God's help I run faster."

Do you put any credence in that? What should we say about that? God makes people run fast? God is a secret powerpack to win the Olympics? God is my Red Bull, He gives me wings? I don't think that's what he was saying. But I do think he meant what he said. He depended on God for strength, and he found God worthy of that faith. Liddell was born in China in 1902 to missionary parents and after the Olympics he returned to share the good news message of Jesus with that people for the rest of his life. He died in a Japanese internment camp in 1945. His life bears testimony, he wasn't using God to win the Olympics, he relied on God for strength in all he did. It wasn't Eric using God for Eric's glory; it was God using Eric for God's glory.

Do you want to do what you can do? Or do you want to see what God can do through you? Do you want to run as far as you can run? Or do you want to see how far God can take you? It doesn't depend on your strength. It doesn't depend on what you can do. It doesn't depend on your ability to carry it out and run to the end. You want to do that. I want to do that. But it doesn't depend on you or me. It depends on Jesus Christ. Lord, direct my heart to the love of God and the perseverance of Christ. It all depends on Jesus, on whether Christ is able to persevere, to carry out what He intends. Can He? Let's review. Jesus stepped down from heaven and left all divine glories to, as it says, "empty himself" and take on human nature. Not easy. He persevered. Jesus was challenged at every step, lied about, chastised, made fun of, belittled. The only group He could muster was a ragtag bunch of doubting tax-collectors and fishermen. Not easy. He persevered. When the religious authorities of Jerusalem conspired with the occupying power of Rome to arrest and beat Him on trumped up charges, He persevered. When His body was pinned to the cross, His heart collapsed within Him, His lungs filling with fluid choking out His life. He persevered. When death tried to hold Him and the grave tried to keep Him, He persevered. When we, His beloved ones, denied His name and ran our own paths toward destruction, He persevered, He persevered, to reach us by His Spirit and bring us home. Can we count on Him? Christ's perseverance. That's steadfast.

## STUDY GUIDE

### STEADFAST • "Christ's Perseverance"

#### 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

#### **UP:** UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word<sup>1</sup>

Read aloud the passage for the week: 2 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5.

- 1) Reread verses 13–14. How might these serve as encouragement in a challenging time?
- 2) Reread verse 2:15. Why do you think Paul encourages the Thessalonians to hold fast to the apostles' teachings? What role does Scripture play in your life when things get hard?
- 3) Reread 3:1. A recent poll indicated that 47 percent of Christians between the ages of 20 and 35 think evangelism is wrong. What do you think about Paul's prayer request in this verse?
- 4) Reread 3:3–5. Do you feel like you can trust the Lord to strengthen you and Christ's ability to persevere during difficult times? Why or why not?
- 5) How might these verses 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)

Reread 3:2. Paul asks for the people to pray for his team. Take time now to pray for those who are serving as missionaries abroad. Pray for them by name if you know individuals serving in this capacity.

#### **IN:** Connect with Each Other

Who in your life needs extra encouragement in this season? How might you encourage them to persevere?