

Nov 13, 11 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

STANDING FIRM IN THE LORD

This weekend, or I might even say, this past week or so our nation honored our Veterans as we did this morning with a CD from our past. This week there was an Honor Flight to Washington D.C. honoring those who fought in WW II. When they showed the highlights one of the men interviewed was a member of the Roanoke church where I served and it was great seeing him and wonder how many other men I might know had taken that flight some other time. We take our hats off for these veterans of WW II and all the vets who have served in war time and in peace to defend our country and many countries around the world. We give a great big salute to their bravery and their sacrifice and we salute those who did not make it home.

I say all of this in part because many times a soldier has to stand firm in what he does. I have been fascinated by World War II events more than any other war, maybe because I was a kid when it happened and my brother was in the Navy. It was my brother being in the Navy that at age 11 I knew I was going to be in the Navy someday. Fortunately in some ways, my tour in the Navy came at the tail end of the Korean Conflict and just before Vietnam. I have been reading books about navy battles and the marines and what some of them had to go through. It was tough for them as it was for any vet who served in Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom and some not so well known wars or conflicts.

The one thing that stands out in my mind as I read this last book about Iwo Jima and other Pacific battles was the firmness of our fighting military. They dug in and were ready to fight the enemy. They held their positions and advanced to take control and then dug in again. Even those who were captured and were in the death

march at Bataan and Corregidor remained firm in their defiance of the enemy, even when it cost some their lives, or being punished in cruel ways. When I was on Guam I had the privilege to know a Lt Commander who survived the Bataan death march. Many have stories to tell, while others tried to put those battles behind and move on with their lives. But as we all know, sometimes you can't let go of the past, and the past just won't always let go of their minds. Those who have taken the Honor Flights have remembered friends that lost their lives and battles that they fought to keep our country free. But as some of these battles are often forgotten as vets age, more have spoken out to their families telling others of what happened on islands that seem so far from us today. Stories about our enemies that are now our allies and friends and with whom we do business. Places a tourist might visit or what might today be called a little slice of paradise.

Today we also remember those early Christians who also had to remain firm in what they believed in order to survive their battles. When you read the Scriptures you find those early Christians' who had to stay firm to their belief in Jesus.... those disciples hid in the upper room after Jesus was arrested. Then you read how some were tossed to the lions or fought with gladiators. Others were crucified like Jesus along a well traveled road to make an example of them. Even Peter died on a cross, but didn't feel worthy enough to be crucified like his Master so he had them turn him upside down. Hebrews 11 talks about some of those heroes of our faith, those who stood firm to the very end. From Abraham right down to the early church these folks had to remain firm in what they believed even though some tried to make them renounce their faith.

The Apostle Paul was one of those guys who at one time persecuted Christians. He had authority to arrest and put them in jail and even have them punished and put them to death. In Acts 8 you find him standing next to Stephen as

he is being stoned for telling the truth about who Jesus was and his belief in him. Paul, who was then called ‘Saul’ watched with his own eyes as Stephen took that final breath, but was shaken in his sandals as Stephen lifted his head toward heaven and saw God’s glory as each stone pelted his body. That my friends, is standing firm in the Lord. And like his Lord, the last words that came from his mouth were, “Father forgive them.” Paul watched and the scene must have played over and over in his mind for days, for weeks, maybe even for months. He couldn’t get that image out of his mind of Stephen dying looking toward heaven with a smile on his lips as the words of forgiveness came from Stephen’s mouth. Who knows, maybe, just maybe those words were directed at Paul who stood and did nothing to stop his stoning. Then a time would come when on that same road to Damascus a bright light would be seen by Paul as he fell from his horse and the Lord blinded him for three days until a messenger was sent to give Paul his physical and spiritual sight and he then knew what it was like to be like Stephen. For now he had his conversion experience and his call to spread the Good News about Jesus to everyone. And in those journeys he preached in synagogues where he was accepted until he mentioned Jesus and he was led out, no thrown out of them, often beaten or whipped. And now, in prison, having faced his enemies, those who wanted to kill him he writes a letter to the Thessalonians after hearing a report from Timothy who had visited them: *“We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact when we were with you we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way.”*

Did you catch his message? He was sending Timothy to “strengthen and encourage them in their faith.” Why? Because tough times would be coming, and

had come and he wanted them to remember to dig in, take hold, remain strong in the Lord.

Then he wrote these words: *“Timothy has... brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.... since you are standing firm in the Lord.”*

Ever had a tough time? I'm sure you have sometime in your lives. Our world isn't so much different than it was in Paul's time. The circumstances might have been different but that mean old man with the pitchfork and forked tongue was still working overtime to get Christians to stop walking the walk. They had their struggles, their problems just like our world does today.

You know these days an election is coming. Just recently the headlines have been about Herman Cain. Slander has hit his campaign for the presidency. When some of those allegations came out while he was getting ready to meet and talk with people he kind of laughed it off and turned his back and said because he was then the front runner he had a bull's eye on his back and people were taking shots at him. So he took a stand and came before the people to give his account of the situation. Though it looks like it hasn't gone away he fielded the tough questions and then went on with his campaign.

Paul says, “folks, I'm sending my messenger to you and the whole world that because you are Christians there are going to be others out there who want to destroy your faith. You have a target on your back because you believe differently than others, you walk to the beat of a different drummer. You walk with Jesus and the world doesn't understand how you can love and forgive the way you do. The

world doesn't know how you can care for others like Jesus did. It boggles their mind." Paul would cry out to say when trials come, "Stand firm! Put on the whole armor of God. Stand firm and fight the devil right where he is. Stand behind that shield of salvation and remember what Christ did for you. That mean old serpent wants to do his best to wreck and destroy your faith. He did it with Adam and Eve, he did it with Moses and he did it with King David, and many of those kings who 'did evil in the eyes of the Lord.' He did it with others throughout the centuries So stand firm in the faith. Those who keep on keeping on till the end will find their crown of glory waiting. Remember, you are not alone, God is with you!" Let me hear and 'AMEN!'

Don't these words help us too? Christians are told to love one another, even our enemies. How hard is that? It's easier to say than to do. Corrie Ten Boom wrote of a time after being in a German death camp that God was using her as his witness on how she stood firm for her faith in the camp having Bible studies, praying with the women in her barracks, taking care of her sister's needs as well as others, thanking God even for cockroaches and those bugs that kept the guards from entering their barracks. On her tour promoting her book about those experiences and how God watched over her and healed her of her hatred her eyes fell on the eyes of a gentleman who was listening from way in the back. She began to tremble and almost lost her thought and composure. She finished her message and many came to greet and shake her hand and thank her for sharing words of hope and encouragement. But she couldn't help notice this fellow from the back standing in line to shake her hand too. When it was his turn he asked her which camp she was in, and when. Though he didn't remember her, Corrie Ten Boom remembered him as one of their guards. Let me read her own words."

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsy’s pain-blanced face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein.” he said. “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!” His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

Corrie’s faith was once more tested as she raised that hand to shake with one she once despised. She stood firm in the Lord. She put on the whole armor of God and met the enemy, and the enemy was no longer an enemy.

Troubles come when you least expect them. Remember when you became a Christian God didn’t remove all your troubles, he said I will be with you in them. He never promised you would be rich with money, but he did promise a wealth of his presence. He didn’t say the storms wouldn’t come, but he did say I’ll be with

you in the storms. He didn't say everyone would like you, but that Jesus loves you. Don't agree? Check out Scripture. Remember stories of Peter and the storms at sea. Remember what happened to the Christians who believed found in Hebrews 11? Some used as sport by Nero and put in the ring with lions. Others had to hide in caves to escape persecution. Why do we have these stories? I believe we find the answer right here in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians... *"to strengthen and encourage you in your faith so that no one would be unsettled by these trials."*

Faith becomes strong as it is tested, as it is put through the fire. Steel becomes steel only after it is put through the fires. Soldiers become heroes only after facing the enemy. Christians will be tested, you can bet on that. Christians will be tested for what they believe and the way that they live. That's just the facts of it all. Sometimes we are mocked because we won't do what everyone else is doing. Some make fun of Christians because they are different in many ways.

In his instructions to the Ephesian church Paul ended his letter with these words of encouragement. Hear them now, for your lives, for your trials, no matter what they are.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For your 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. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes you may stand your ground."

Peter puts it this way in his encouragement.

"Be self-controlled and alert; Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith,

because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering.”

These are only a few places from Scripture that we hear words of encouragement from God. They are there to help us in our daily struggles, and to help us when the enemy attacks. And like Pearl Harbor, and some of those battles I've read about, you never know when the enemy is coming. There may not be an alarm to go off on the outside, but there will be an alarm inside of you that will say, "Warning! Warning! Warning! Be on the alert. Warning! Warning!"

Our call is to be always ready and to stand firm and be alert....for as Paul writes, "they will come."

Standing firm in the faith! That's what it's all about. So may it be today as we remember the courage of those who have fought the good fight and now rest from their labors, as we remember the many missionaries that gave their lives for the gospel message of salvation, as we remember those who have fought in every war that we have fought. Let us remember to have the courage and heart of a Peter or a Paul as we face our own enemy. The command is Stand firm in the faith! The battle has been won....by Jesus Christ.