

INTRODUCTION

Life is tough, and even Christians get tired and discouraged at times. Have you ever heard the expression, "It's enough to make a preacher cuss?" A pastor stopped at a yard sale to buy a used lawnmower. There was a kid who was doing his best to make the sale. The preacher pulled the rope several times to crank the mower, but it wouldn't start. The boy, "You have to kick it and say a few cuss words before it will crank." The preacher said, "Son, I can't do that. It's been years since I used a cuss word." The kid said, "Just keep pullin' the rope, it'll come back to you."

The world is in such chaos, that you may think it's enough to make a preacher cuss. But I'm not cussing today; I'm discussing how you can stand firm in an unstable world!

There is a lot of anxiety in America today about the future of health care and insurance. For several years now, we've been hearing about the advent of the Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare. It was supposed to be a miracle cure for the health care crisis. It was supposed to give access to health care for people who couldn't afford it, and now the government's website has glitches.

I'm not talking politics here, because there are moral issues at stake. Christian organizations, like Guidestone Resources in Dallas, are being required by Obamacare to pay for abortion drugs for their employees. Now, if you have a steeple, you're exempt from this requirement, but Christian colleges and companies like Guidestone and Hobby Lobby are being forced to make a choice between obeying this new law or to follow what their faith teaches.

Dr. Russell Moore is the new President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. He possesses one of the sharpest minds of anyone I've ever known. He will be preaching here at Green Acres in February. He appeared recently on Fox News and was asked about this requirement. He said, "The HHS mandate is just one fiery rafter in a burning house. Religious liberty is under assault in this country in ways that are more pronounced than we have seen since founding era. In addition to the HHS mandate, same-sex marriage, now legal in 14 states and D. C., has produced growing clashes with religious freedom. Photographers, bakers, florists, and others who have refused to participate in same-sex ceremonies because of their Christian convictions have lost in court or suffered financially despite their appeals to the right to freely exercise their religion."

So, how can we stand firm in the midst of an unstable world? Well, as bad as you may think conditions are now, I think the Paul's friends in Thessalonica had it much worse. They had NO health insurance, no hospitals, and only quacks for doctors. They had a crazed Roman Emperor who was killing Christians by the thousands. They were losing their jobs when they chose to follow Jesus. Someone had produced a fake letter from Paul saying Jesus had already returned. In the preceding verses Paul wrote them that Jesus hadn't returned yet. And when He comes, He will win the final victory. But until that happens, he encourages them to stand firm in an unstable world. These words still resonate with us.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17. "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you 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, stand firm and hold 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."

In these few verses, Paul tells the believers to do two things: stand firm and hold onto the Word of God. Knowing the truth and hanging onto it can give you stability and peace.

I have always enjoyed reading the Peanuts cartoon strip. In one episode Lucy and Linus are staring out the window at the pouring rain. Lucy says, "Boy, look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?" Linus replies, "It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow." Lucy smiles and says, "You've taken a great load off my mind." Linus says, "Sound theology has a way of doing that!"

Truth is a good thing to get a hold on. Even our Declaration of Independence says, "We HOLD these truths to be self-evident..." In this passage, Paul reminds us of four unshakable truths to which we should hold on.

1. GOD LOVES ME UNCONDITIONALLY!

The Bible says, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord." If there is one overarching truth of the Bible, it is that God exists. But right on the heels of that truth is reality that this God who created everything has chosen to love us. Have you ever Googled something and looked at how many links there are? For instance, if you Google the phrase "the love of God" there are over 1.2 billion links.

Much of the love we experience from people is conditional. Conditional love is based upon your performance. You have to earn it. A person may say, "I will love you IF..." They may say, "I will love you if you will love me." Or "I will love you if you obey me." Or "I will love you IF you'll make me feel a certain way." But God's love is unconditional. God doesn't love me because I'm especially lovable; He loves me because HE is loving. In other words, God doesn't love us for who WE are. He loves us for who HE is.

Why does God love you? Because God IS love. God loves you because God loves you. God knows more about you than anyone else. He knows every mistake you've ever made, and every mistake you'll ever make. And yet, He still loves you with an unconditional love.

God said through the prophet Jeremiah, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued to extend faithful love to you." (Jeremiah 31:3 HCSB)

When you study the Qur'an and compare it to the Bible, you cannot claim that the God of the Bible is Allah of Islam. In the Qur'an, the love and approval of Allah is based upon human performance. If a person is faithful to follow the five pillars of Islam, then perhaps—and there's

no sense of assurance—Allah will choose to allow them to enter paradise at death. But Allah hates the infidel and commands Muslims to oppose infidels to the death.

But the Bible teaches that God loves the world. He loves everyone—the good, the bad, and the ugly. There's nothing I can do to make God love me any more. And there's nothing I can do to make God love me any less.

The Bible is full of examples of the love of God. In Luke 15, Jesus said God is the kind of Shepherd who has 99 sheep safe in the sheepfold, and one lost sheep has wandered away. He leaves those 99 and searches for that lost sheep. Have you ever felt like that lost sheep? God loves you so much that if you had been the only lost person on earth, He would have still come seeking you.

Jesus said God is the kind of father who even loves a disobedient rebellious child. He told the story of a son who broke his father's heart by asking for the dad to give him what he had coming in his will. Then the son took that money and ran off to the bright lights of the big city and spent it all on wine, women, and song. But when that broken down, good-for-nothing son heads home, God is like a father who runs to embrace that wayward child. Do you ever feel like that son? God loves you.

The book of Hosea teaches us that that God is like a husband who has a wife who deserts him. She goes off and becomes a prostitute. Then she becomes so debased that she ends up a slave who is bought and sold like a piece of meat. And yet, that husband gathers all the money he has and goes and buys back his adulterous wife. And he loves her and restores her to purity and dignity. Have you ever felt like that woman? God loves you.

Hang onto that truth! Don't let go.

2. GOD CHOSE ME BEFORE I BELIEVED!

The Bible says, "From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth."

There is a great truth in the Bible that we sometimes miss. But long before we chose to believe in Jesus, which is absolutely essential for our salvation, God chose us first. I can remember as a child how all the boys would gather on the playground after school to play a pick-up game of touch football. The two best players were usually designated as captains to choose sides. As kids, we took this as serious as the NFL draft. Would we be chosen? When would we be chosen? We weren't shy. We'd hold up our hand and say, "Choose me! Choose me!" The first ones chosen had a special status just barely below the two captains. When they were chosen, they'd swagger over to stand behind their teammate. And as the group of remaining boys gets smaller, the anxiety level grows. "Me! Me! Pick me!" And then when there were only a couple of guys left, it was like, "You can have him; I don't want him." Or, "Okay, I guess you can be on our team." And those who were chosen last would hang their head and join the team, but their dreams of athletic greatness were melting like ice cream on a summer day.

But God chose you first. He chose you before you were born. He chose you before Jesus even came to die for you. The Bible says, "For He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will." (Ephesians 1:4-5 HCSB)

God chose you, but you also have a say in whether or not you will be on His team. The issue of your will is still involved. When a person is saved, there are three factors involved: The Word of God; the work of the Spirit; and the will of the person. When God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, we see a beautiful parable of salvation. God chose Mary; she didn't choose Him. The angel, Gabriel delivered the word of God. He told her that God had chosen her to give birth to a son named Jesus who would be the Savior of the world. Her objection was that this was inconceivable—actually, she was inconceivable, because she had never been with a man. Gabriel told her the Holy Spirit would come upon her and God would do a supernatural work in her. So we have the word of God; then there's the work of the Spirit. But Gabriel waited to see what Mary had to say. God wasn't going to force her to be the mother of Jesus. He's too much of a heavenly gentleman for that. So Mary said, "May it be done to me according to your word." That was a profession of her will to accept what God was offering.

I'm here to announce that God has chosen you to be in His family. That's the Word of God. How can that be? Regeneration is the work of the Spirit. All that's left is for you to say, "God, may it be done to me according to your Word." That's where your will comes in.

You're not a robot God programmed to believe. He chose you in love. But once He's chosen you to be on His team, will you line up with Him?

Imagine this. You're a kid again. And you're in a neighborhood with a bunch of other kids. You want to choose sides for a basketball game. Nobody is older than 12, except this one guy who is a lot bigger and older than everybody else. So obviously he's one of the captains. You flip a coin to see who chooses first. And this big guy gets the first choice. Oh, I forget to tell you the big guy's name. His name is LeBron James. Now I think it's safe to say his team is going to win. And for his first choice, he looks at you and says, "I want you to be on my team." What are you going to say? "No thanks." Not if you're smart. You're going to say, "Yes sir! I will be on your team, Mr. James. Thanks for choosing me!"

And who wouldn't want to be on God's team? When He chooses you, you can know for certain you're on the winning team!

3. GOD GIVES ME HOPE FOR THE FUTURE!

The Bible says, "Who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope." I love that phrase, "Good Hope." Through the years, I've noticed some churches that are named "Good Hope Baptist Church." I recall the first time I drove from Tyler to Canton. I saw a sign on Texas Highway 64 that said, "Little Hope Baptist Church." I almost skidded off the road! I remember thinking, "What? That's a terrible name for a church!" I thought they should call themselves "Good Hope" or at least "Some Hope." The only thing worse than "Little Hope" would be "No Hope Baptist Church." But since then I've learned "the rest of the story." Not long

after first seeing the sign, I was so curious, I contacted the pastor and confirmed that the community got its name from a little girl named Hope Moore who died in the 19th century. Her family donated land in her honor for a church—thus the name “Little Hope.” You can see her name on the “Little Hope Moore Community Center.” That’s how the church got its name. But the sign can be puzzling to people who don’t know the full story. If it was up to me, I think I’d add a sign on top of the current sign so it would read: “You find a lotta’ hope at Little Hope Baptist Church!”

We use the word “hope” for something that might happen. We say, “I hope I pass this test.” Or “I hope the Dallas Cowboys beat the Detroit Lions today.” But we aren’t sure. But in the Bible, the word hope means an absolute certainty. H.O.P.E. means Having Only Positive Expectations.

A few years ago there was a movie filmed in Smithville, Texas called “Hope Floats.” But hope isn’t some lightweight flotsam that drifts into your life. It is much heavier than that. In fact, hope is an anchor. The Bible says, “We who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope as an anchor for our lives, safe and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.” (Hebrews 6:18-20)

The inner sanctuary of the Temple was where the presence of God was manifested. There was a huge curtain separating it from the rest of the world. Only the Jewish high priest could enter there for a few hours one day a year. But when Jesus was crucified, this curtain was torn. It was his way of ushering us into the presence of God. But why the picture of an anchor, entering a place of safety?

In Bible times, an anchor was usually a rock with a hole in the middle for a rope to pass through. Anchors weren’t just used to keep a boat from drifting. Because seafaring was not an exact science as it is today; ships often had trouble entering a small harbor. There was a custom that was practiced to ensure ships could arrive safely in the harbor. Sometimes the main ship paused outside the harbor entrance and the anchor was placed in a smaller boat, called a forerunner. Then the smaller boat with the anchor rowed into the harbor and dropped the anchor in a safe place. Then the anchor line, attached to a pulley on the ship was tightened and the ship was literally pulled safely into the harbor. Jesus is our anchor of hope who draws us into the very presence of God. Are you secured to this anchor of hope named Jesus?

During the early days of World War II, our nation was reeling after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. We were fighting enemies in Japan and Germany. It was a tough, scary time when people had to ration food and other items. It was during this time that a pastor’s wife from Pennsylvania, Ruth Caye Jones, wrote a beloved hymn that speaks to our need for stability in an unstable world. The lyrics said: “In times like these, you need a Savior; In times like these you need an anchor; Be very sure, be very sure; Your anchor holds and grips the solid rock!” The chorus says, “This Rock is Jesus; Yes, He’s the One! This Rock is Jesus; the only One; Be very sure, be very sure; Your anchor holds and grips the solid rock!”

4. GOD GIVES ME STRENGTH TO STAND FIRM!

The Bible says, "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father...encourage your hearts and strengthen you."

In Ephesians 6:10 Paul writes, "Be strong in the Lord and the power of His might." Then he writes about putting on the whole armor of God. The point of the being dressed for battle is to be able to stand. And he says it three times. "Stand—and having done all, to stand. Stand firm then."

You've heard the expression, "Don't just STAND there, DO something." But we can turn that around when it comes to the Christian life. "Don't just DO something; STAND there." Because the Christian life doesn't start with action, it starts with conviction and belief—standing on truth. That truth always leads to action, but first we must stand firm on what we believe. As Martin Luther said when he was charged as a heretic by the Catholic Church, "Here we stand. We do no other. God help us." Someone said that if you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything.

We have solid truths we stand upon. And while our culture keeps redefining truth and morality, we stand firm on the truth of the Bible. As another favorite hymn of mine says, "On Christ the Solid Rock, I stand. All other ground is sinking sand."

But we can't stand in our own strength. God is our source of strength. When we were kids we sang, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong; they are weak but He is strong." But we never grow up to the point where we no longer need His strength. We're all still weak and He is strong.

The Bible says, "God—He clothes me with strength...He makes my feet like the feet of a deer and sets me securely on the heights...You widen a place beneath me for my steps, and my ankles do not give way." (Psalm 18:32-33, 36 HCSB)

Every time we visit Israel, we drive alongside the steep mountains in the Judean wilderness. And we always see an animal called the ibex, which is a great word for Scrabble, or Words with Friends, by the way. The ibex is a small deer that can climb up on the tallest mountains and stand on the narrowest ledge. Deer and mountain goats are like the ibex. They can easily scale the heights. What's their secret to walking safely? They look to see where to put their front feet, and then they instinctively place their back feet in exactly the same spot where their front feet were.

That's what God wants us to do. But we don't have four legs; we have two. How does God make our feet like the feet of a deer? He wants us to follow in His steps. When you are following Jesus, the places He steps are safe for us to step.

CONCLUSION

A few years ago, Henry Dempsey was at the controls of an Eastern Express commuter Airlines flight. He and the copilot were relocating a Beech 99 turbo-prop from Portland, Maine to Boston, so there were no passengers onboard. As they were climbing out after takeoff, Dempsey heard a banging noise from the back of the aircraft, so he gave the controls to the copilot and left his seat

to investigate. He noticed the pull-down door didn't seem to be completely closed so he grabbed it to close it. At that moment they hit some turbulence and the door flew open and Dempsey was sucked out.

The terrified copilot looked back and saw the door was open and the pilot had fallen out. He got on the radio and declared an emergency and even requested a helicopter to search for Dempsey's body. But when the door flew open, Dempsey grabbed the sides and he was hanging on for dear life. He was being buffeted by the airflow as the plane was flying at 200 mph, but he refused to let go. The copilot landed at the nearest airport, not knowing the pilot was dangling out the back door. He successfully landed the airplane, and Dempsey's head avoided the surface of the runway by less than a foot.

The emergency crews were astonished to see Dempsey hanging on upside down on the open door. It took them several minutes to pry Dempsey's fingers from the door. One rescuer said it took a grip of steel and nerves of iron to hang on with all the turbulence. But Dempsey refused to let go—and it saved his life.

We're not hanging out of an airplane, but we're in the middle of a cultural storm that is only going to get more and more turbulent. Like Henry Dempsey, we need to hang on for dear life to these powerful truths. Confess them with me one more time. God loves me unconditionally! God chose me before I believed! God gives me hope for the future! God gives me strength for the future.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes