

INTRODUCTION

This is the 28th message in this series called "Finding Hope in a Hopeless World." As we come to the end of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, let's review what we've learned. The main theme of these two letters is that Jesus Christ is coming soon, and we need to stay ready to meet Him. Some troublemakers had stirred up the church by claiming Jesus had already come. Paul refuted that, and in the process introduced us to Satan's Superman, the Antichrist. Paul stressed that because Jesus is coming, you don't quit your job and wait on a hill. Instead, you need to roll up your sleeves and work hard. He said if a man won't work he wouldn't eat.

We sometimes think these churches that received letters from Paul were perfect congregations. No. In fact, the reason Paul usually wrote to churches was to correct some problems. All churches have problems. I used to quote a little poem about a perfect church that says, "I think that I shall never see; A church that's all it ought to be; A Church that has no empty pews; Whose Pastor never has the blues; A church whose deacons always deke; and none is proud, but all are meek. Where gossips never peddle lies or make complaints or criticize; Where all are always sweet and kind; And all to other's faults are blind. Such perfect churches there may be; But none of them are known to me. But still we'll work, and pray and plan; and ask God to make His church the best He can."

Paul concluded his second letter with some strong advice about the need to warn certain Christians. I'm calling it "God's Early Warning System."

The day after Christmas in 2004 began normally for thousands of villagers and vacationers on the Indian Ocean. But deep beneath ocean off the coast Sumatra, a 9.1 earthquake occurred. That's the third largest earthquake ever recorded by a seismograph. The massive shift of the seabed triggered a series of tsunamis. These tsunamis raced toward the shores of fourteen nations. In deep water, they could barely be detected. But when the tsunamis arrived on shallow beaches, they rose to a height of 100 feet and flattened much of the seashore in their path.

Sadly, 230,000 people died from these deadly tsunamis. Most of them had no warning. The earthquake occurred 90 minutes to two hours before the waves hit the shores. What if they could have been warned in time to flee to higher ground?

Since that time the global maritime community has installed thousands of early warning sensors in the most earthquake prone areas of the globe. If the same scenario occurred to today, the seabed sensor would notify a nearby buoy, which would send the signal to a satellite. From the satellite, the info is sent to the officials who post the warning to news outlets and on the internet. This early warning system is designed to save lives.

We're all familiar with weather warning systems. When a hurricane or tornado appears to be approaching a community, the National Weather Service will issue a warning for residents to evacuate or to take cover. Early warning systems save lives.

God has an early warning system as well. Sometimes a believer gets involved in dangerous behavior or starts down a spiritually unhealthy pathway. At that point God activates His early

warning system. Guess who that is? According to the Bible we are to be the early warning system to help a Christian veering off track from God's will.

In these final verses in 2 Thessalonians, there are two powerful truths we can take away and apply to our lives.

I. GOD CALLS US TO WARN DISOBEDIENT BELIEVERS

Paul wrote, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)

Like every church, there were members at Thessalonica who were unruly and rebellious about following the instructions Paul had given. He said you should identify the person, but he never said you should kick the troublemaker out of the church. He wrote that once the troublemaker has been identified, then the members of the church were not to associate with him. That means he doesn't receive an invitation to the dinner party you may be hosting. That kind of peer pressure should cause the troublemaker to be ashamed, and hopefully, he'll get the point and start behaving better.

Paul made it clear that this brother or sister in the church isn't your enemy; they are a member of God's family. Our job is to warn them. Now most of us try to avoid confrontational situations and confrontational conversations. We try to avoid them at all times. We think confronting a person about a problem they have is rude and unkind. But sometimes confronting a brother or sister can be the kindest thing you can do.

Some people are so rude they confront people to hurt them. But when a believer confronts another believer, the goal is to heal them, not hurt them. So when should you confront a believer and warn him or her? Let me give you three occasions when you need to be an Early Warning System to a brother or sister in Christ.

A. When your relationship with them is broken

Jesus knew there would be relationship problems between His followers. That's why He gave us some specific instructions on how to deal with a situation where you and another brother or sister are estranged. Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15-18)

The goal of this confrontation is to restore your relationship with your brother or sister in Christ. Notice Jesus said if your brother or sister listens to you, you have WON them over. The purpose of this confrontation is not to condemn them or to win an argument; it is to win your brother or sister.

Before I examine this process, note three important qualifications. First, this process is for two believers only. It won't work if either or both are nonbelievers. Second, this process is only for when a person has done something that is a personal affront or offense against you. It doesn't apply to sin in general. Third, and most importantly, if you have the ability to simply overlook the offense without it hurting your relationship simply forgive the person and move on. I'm not talking about ignoring it or repressing it. I'm not talking about allowing someone to run roughshod over you. But if it's a minor offense, and you can just forgive them without bringing it up, go ahead. Jesus said, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other."

Sometimes a person does or says something so wrong it creates a rift in your relationship. That's when this process should be followed. If you become aware of a breach in your relationship, you should privately approach that person and seek to make it right. The biggest mistake Christians make is they go to someone else first to talk about what that person did or said. At that point, you have broken the loop, and you become the offender rather than the one offended.

It works both ways: If you realize you have done or said something hurtful or harmful against someone, don't wait for them to come to you—go to them and apologize. But on the other hand if someone has done or said something to you that wounded you, then you should also go to them privately and seek to resolve the issue. In 95% of the cases, relationships can be mended in these private one-on-one meetings.

But if that person refuses to resolve the issue, then you can take one or two mutual friends and bring them into the conversation. You don't take your best friends to gang up on the person you're confronting. Take a neutral party. I've served as a mediator in a number of relationship resolutions. In 99% of the cases, the problem is resolved in steps one or two.

But if the person is still resistant, then you tell it to the church. Is that like when we were kids and we said, "I'm tellin' on you!" No, you tell the church so they can pray for everybody involved and pray with the people involved. But if the relationship still isn't mended, you don't kick that person out of the church. Jesus said you treat them like you would a publican or a tax collector. Jesus loved publicans and tax collectors but He knew they needed Jesus. So if a person balks at every step, you treat them as someone who needs to meet the Lord.

B. When they are trapped in sin

Another time when you should confront and warn a believer is when they are trapped in some kind of sin. The Bible says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you may also be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:1-3)

The phrase "caught in a sin" doesn't mean that they are "caught red-handed doing it." It refers to a trap. It's like an animal caught in a trap. If you were walking in the woods and saw a beautiful collie caught in a trap, chances are you'd do everything you could to release the wounded animal, and then take him and nurse him back to health.

We're surrounded by friends and family members who are trapped in the addiction of some horrible sin. We should at least show them the same mercy we'd show that collie.

The truth is sometimes committed Christians stumble and fall into sin. The Bible reads like a Who's Who of spiritual failures. Abraham was a liar; Moses was a murderer; David committed adultery and murder; Peter denied the Lord three times.

Christians make mistakes. How do you react when you learn a Christian was arrested for drunk driving, or for possession of narcotics? When an immature Christian hears about someone's mistake, they delight in spreading the juicy details to everyone they can call or email. The favorite exercise of those condemners is jumping to conclusions and running people down.

But when a Spirit-filled Christian learns of a mistake, it breaks their heart, and they will go to them and lovingly confront them about their problem. They won't accuse or condemn. They'll do it gently. I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases Galatians 6:1 in *The Message*: "If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments to yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day's out."

C. When they disrupt the unity of the church

There are times when someone disrupts the unity of a church. In our case, it could be disturbing the unity of a SMBS group, because each of our SMBS groups is like a church within the church. The Bible says, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." (Titus 3:10-11)

The Bible teaches that spiritual unity is a beautiful thing. Psalm 133:1 (NASB) says, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" We cannot create spiritual unity, only the Holy Spirit can do that. But in our own sinfulness and selfishness, we can disrupt the unity of the church.

Next Sunday morning, the platform in the Worship Center will be filled with a large orchestra as our Celebration Choir and Orchestra presents "We Have a Savior." It's very important that this orchestra have all their instruments tuned correctly. If those orchestra members just came in off the street and sat down to play, the sound would be terrible.

But before the first performance, Tim Nipp is going to play an F. All the wind instruments will tune their instruments to so their F is unison with Tim's. Then he will play the note A for the stringed instruments. They will tune their instruments to match his A. Few things are more beautiful than a symphony orchestra playing in tune. But if two or three instruments are out of tune, it can be a painful experience.

The same is true within the church. There are few things more beautiful than a unified church where everyone is serving in harmony. But if there are two or three troublemakers who are disrupting the unity of the church, it is a painful experience for everyone involved. As a church,

you don't tune your lives to mine. We all tune our lives to the Lord Jesus. He is our F, our Faithful One. He is our A, our Anointed One.

How is the unity of your church, or your SMBS group? At Green Acres, every SMBS group is like a church within a church. If you encounter someone who is hurting the unity of our church or of your small group, you can't just ignore it. You should lovingly confront them and encourage them to get in tune with the rest of the members. If they are a mature believer, they will humbly repent and retune their behavior. But sometimes, they refuse to listen.

The Bible says Paul practiced what he preached. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he knew there were a couple of ladies in the church who were hurting the unity. Before he ended the letter, he called their names. He wrote, "I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." (Philippians 4:2) How would you have liked to be those two ladies when the letter was first being read? The name Euodia means "sweet fragrance," but her divisive spirit was stinking up the fellowship. Syntyche means "blessed with favor," but when it came to her spiritual health, she was blistered with a fever. He was saying, "Start living up to your names! Be sweet. Be a blessing!"

You and I are God's Early Warning System for the Church. It's never easy and pleasant to confront another believer, but there are times when you need to obey God and warn another person.

II. GOD GIVES US ALL THE RESOURCES WE NEED

Paul signed off with a prayer and a proof that he was the writer. "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." (2 Thessalonians 3:16-18)

In these few lines we discover four of the valuable resources that God makes available to us:

A. His peace

Paul prayed they would have peace at all times and in every way. That covers it all. Do you possess an inner peace that passes all understanding? The way you find peace is by having the Lord of peace living in your heart.

We rush around in such a hectic way, especially during this busy season. As I study the life of Jesus I'm touched by the knowledge that He was never in a hurry. He had time to slow down and point out daisies and birds. He had time to pick up little children and bless them.

God's peace is ours for the claiming. Will you let His peace fill you?

B. His presence

In the King James Version Paul wrote, "the Lord be with you all." Did you catch the "ya'll?" Paul was from southern Tarsus. Are you aware of God's presence with you at all times? He promised He would never leave you nor forsake you.

How would you act if I stayed with you the rest of today? If I went home with you for lunch? If I sat down with you and watched a little NFL football? Dallas can't lose today, because they're not playing until Monday night. Then I had supper with you. Then when it was time for you to go to sleep, I'm there in my PJs. And when you wake up the next morning, I'm still there. How would you act? Of course, I'm just kidding, but if someone accompanied you everywhere you went, you'd be aware they were there, and you might act and talk a little differently. Don't worry. I'm not going home with you. I won't be there when you wake up. But God will. Celebrate His presence every moment of every day.

C. His Word

Paul dictated most of his letters, but when he finished, he often added his personal signature to the letter. There had been false letters that had confused the church, so he wanted to ensure they knew this letter was really from him. In the last chapter of Galatians, Paul mentioned he was signing his letter using such large letters. Some have suggested Paul had eye problems and he had to make very large letters. Paul's signature was his verification that this was truly the Word of God. When you sign your name, you authorize the withdrawal of money from your bank account. God didn't sign His name to the Bible, instead He filled different men with His Spirit and they spoke for Him.

This semester in WEBS, we've been studying Convincing Proof: The Jesus Prophecies. When I began the study, I didn't think I could have any more confidence in the truth and veracity of the Bible than I already had. But even I have been surprised to see the hundreds of prophecies that have been fulfilled. There is no other book in the world like the Bible. And God has given us His sure Word! What a blessing!

D. His grace

Paul's first sentence in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians was "grace and peace to you through the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace is God giving us what we need, not what we deserve. I need forgiveness, but I deserve death and hell. I've been saved by grace through faith.

Grace is living a different way because of God's unconditional love for me. I treat people as they need to be treated instead of what they deserve.

CONCLUSION

During this Christmas season, we see all four of these spiritual blessings being expressed. Peace: The angels said to the shepherds: "Peace on earth good will to men." Presence: The prophets said that the child would be called Emmanuel—God with us. God's Word: John writes: In the beginning was the WORD—the Word was God. The Word is Jesus.

Grace? God bending down to send His Son was an act of amazing Grace because we never did anything to earn His gift.

This past summer a Nigerian tugboat was tied alongside an enormous Oil Tanker. It was around 4:00 in the morning, and the members of the twelve-man crew were asleep in their rooms. Without warning, a massive wave arrived and capsized the tug, ripping the lines from the Supertanker. The crippled tug rolled over and in a matter of seconds, sank, resting upside down in 100 feet of water. Rescuers from the oil tanker searched in vain for survivors in the water, but there were none. They assumed all twelve crewmembers had drowned.

Three days later a salvage dive crew was sent down to examine the sunken ship and retrieve the bodies. As one of the divers approached the back of the upside-down hull, he got the surprise of his life. He saw a hand reaching down into the water toward him. He grabbed the hand and it grabbed back. Immediately he radioed, "He's alive! He's alive!"

The entire crew sprang into action. The diver arrived and saw a scared and weak man surviving in a small air pocket. His name was Harrison Okene. For the past sixty hours he had been trapped in the dark and cold water, surviving on only a few sips of Coca-Cola. He also spent time crying out to God. Mr. Okene said, "I was in total darkness just thinking it's the end. I was crying and calling on Jesus to rescue me, I prayed so hard. I was so hungry and thirsty and cold and I was just praying to see some kind of light."

Can you imagine being in total darkness? Cold, afraid, hope draining away as ever minute passed. But there was a light he saw in the water and he reached out to the hand holding the light. They gave Mr. Okene a breathing mask, and lifted him slowly to the surface. Then because he has been submerged so long, these rescuers spent 60 hours with him in a hyperbaric chamber to remove the nitrogen from his bloodstream. He and his rescuers became good friends.

In many ways that rescue operation off the coast of Nigeria is like my personal faith story. I was at a place in my life where I need someone to rescue me. I was trapped in the darkness of sin and didn't know which way to turn. There's no way I could have ever rescued myself. But in love, God sent Jesus on a rescue mission for me. Jesus became a little baby so he could be the kind of man who could go where we are when we're trapped in the darkness of sin. He reached out to and I grabbed His hand, and I've been hanging on ever since.

In order to allow Jesus to rescue you, you see yourself in a situation like Harrison Okene. You're not underwater, but until Jesus rescues you, you are lost in darkness and sin and you have no way to save yourself. More money won't save you. More degrees won't save you. More friends won't save you. More religion won't save you. There is only one who can save you from your sin, and His name is Jesus.

What happened to Harrison Okene is what has happened to each of us who have been rescued by God. The Psalmist wrote, "He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me." (Psalm 18:16-17)

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B. His presence

C. His Word

D. His grace

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes