

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Last Judgment -- November 14th and 17th, 2013

2 Thessalonians 2:13 – 3:5 (NIV – 2011)

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. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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. 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.

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. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. 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. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

Dear children of the Lord,

Back in 1992 a book was written under the title, "Band of Brothers." It gave a historical account of the Easy Company, 506th Airborne Division, U.S. Army, during World War II. This Airborne unit was involved in some of the most daring and important battles fought towards the end of the World II – from attacks on D-Day to some of Hitler's most famous locations in Germany. There was a TV series made about 10 years ago based on this book that showed what it was like to be in the Army during World II. It is this close-knit group of men fighting against all odds that also applies well to us, as soldiers of the cross. "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war" we sing.

We daily face our hidden enemy, the devil; our open enemies, the world in all its evil and unbelief; and the sinful nature, hidden deep inside us. Can we win this battle on our own? Our great commander Jesus has brought us together. By our union in him through faith, we band of brothers and sisters can face and defeat our enemies. Yes, the saints of God will triumph.

Our unity in battle becomes especially important in light of the Last Days. As we draw closer to Jesus' return, conditions will worsen. The love of most will grow cold. Satan's influence will increase. The evil of this world will join forces against the true brothers and sisters in Christ. We need Jesus' strength ever more. We need the encouragement of each other more and more. The Apostle Paul's 2nd letter to Thessalonica bids us as a "Band of brothers and sisters to:

Sermon Theme: Brothers and Sisters -- Stand Firm!

- 1. In the Truth of the Gospel**
- 2. In the Power of Prayer**

The apostle begins with the strength of encouragement. **"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. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Obligations and commands normally do not give a person much enthusiasm. You might have an obligation or duty to take out the garbage each week, but who enjoys it? When Paul speaks of his obligation to thank God for the Christians in Thessalonica, it isn't a bad thing. Enthusiasm and joy fill his words.

When you think of the band of brothers and sisters fighting at your side in St. Luke's Lutheran, give thanks. Give thanks continually – with joy and enthusiasm. Take one of our church directories. Set aside prayer time each day for several families, perhaps going in alphabetical order. Begin with thanks for that person and family. I know we feel stronger connections and have warmer feelings towards some over others. Nonetheless, find those things for which we ought to give thanks for one another. Then tell that person “thank you” to encourage him.

Today on this, “Walking Together” Sunday, I want you to expand your band of brothers and sisters fighting at your side as you include all those in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and to give thanks to our God for them. Thank God for the President Schroeder and the many other men who faithfully administer the many boards and committees in our synod. Thank God for Working Training School – two Prep Schools, a College and a Seminary. Thank God for the people working in our Home and World Mission fields and the many souls in those fields who are united in faith with us. Set aside prayer time each day for teachers and professors – for congregations and mission fields. Begin with thanks for a certain person or congregation. Remember in our battler, we are not alone, but are gathered with a great band of brothers and sisters around the world. God is good and for this we can say, Thanks!

Paul acknowledges the source of strength for this band of brothers and sisters. It comes from God, to whom he gives thanks. **“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. Do you see what Paul is saying about our God? God chose you and your brothers and sisters in the faith as his firstfruits, the best and most delicious part of the harvest, belonging to God. Let us see each other as God's firstfruits, not his leftovers.**

“Because God chose us” also reminds us that God's election of his band of brothers and sisters took place in eternity. God chose the whole band by grace. Before we were born and could have done anything to merit his favor or fall under his wrath, he already set us aside for himself. We know none of us deserves the grace of election. God knew beforehand that we would enter life crippled by our sinful flesh and limping down the crooked path of evil. He chose us — all of the band of brothers and sisters — by grace.

The sanctification (or sanctifying work) of the Holy Spirit set us apart for this rich banquet of grace: loved by the Lord, believing in the truth, called by the gospel, sharing in Jesus' glory. A soldier entering battle often carries a heavy pack. He may have 60 pounds or more of MREs, ammunition, communications equipment, and every supply the commander knows he needs. That heavy pack may save his life or that of his brothers. He would risk his life and that of others if he left it behind.

God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit equip us with the life pack we need for battle. Would you have doubts about whose side you're on? After all, you act in evil ways as often as godly ways. The Holy Spirit declares you a saint, set apart for God through Jesus Christ. Would you wonder if the equipment you have will stand up in battle? God called you to believe in the truth. Stand firm in the truth. Would you think at the end of the day God will turn against you? His good news — forgiven,

renewed, beloved — called us to him. Or would you see the darkness of defeat when the smoke clears? We band of brothers and sisters will share in Jesus' glory!

If this sounds too good and glorious for this band of brothers and sisters, realize that this exceeds every expectation for the sinners serving on the front lines. How well we know our many weaknesses! Have I earnestly prayed with thanks for those serving with me? How frequently I complain with greater enthusiasm than I support and thank. Have I retreated from the battle when facing the opponents' hatred or ridicule? How often my weak trust in God turns me into a coward. Do I like to go on my own, expecting glory for myself? How I hurt my brothers and sisters and dishonor Jesus by seeking exaltation for myself.

Would God still call me — call us — to serve as his saints triumphant? Our brother Jesus guarantees our place in this band of brothers and sisters. The holiness granted us by the Spirit came from Jesus. You will never find Jesus failing in prayer, neglecting to give thanks, complaining bitterly, retreating in fear or seeking his own glory. Look at how he faced the devil in the wilderness. At his most vulnerable moment, weakened by 40 days of hunger and thirst, he refused to submit to Satan. God came first. He triumphed. We triumphed through him!

Last week was Veterans Day, where we as country take some time to humbly and thankfully recognize those among us who have served God and our country in the military. As you talk to those people, you will hear many different stories. You will hear of bravery and fear. You will hear some very sad stories and even stories of those who have given the ultimate sacrifice of their lives so that we might have freedom. What stands out as you talk to veterans is the truth of what these people would be willing to do for their fellow soldiers and for us. They were willing to lay down their life for us.

This reminds me of the words that Jesus spoke, **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13)**. Our brother Jesus rescued us as his band of brothers and sisters when he sacrificed himself on the battlefield. This war had gone on since the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God's holy commands. Generations of sinners, like those who perished in the Flood, earned the wrath of the Almighty. Then the mighty God did a most unusual thing — he went to war against his beloved Son. He forsook his Son in place of rebellious sinners. The entire world got washed clean in the sacrificial blood of one soldier on the cross. God proclaimed peace with us by raising Jesus from the dead.

“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.” Band of brothers and sisters, stand firm. The teachings handed down to us by word of mouth or letter proclaim the gospel. By this message, we stand firm. By this gospel saints triumph. Each soldier has forgiveness for all his sins. God invites us as a band of brothers and sisters united around the truths of God's Word to come together in the celebration of Holy Communion. Receive together with this band of brothers and sisters the meal that unites us. For communion is both the union of Jesus' body and blood with bread and wine and the union of fellow believers at the altar.

2. In the Power of Prayer

What will keep the brothers and sisters ready and willing for the day of battle? The leaders pray for them. Paul didn't write to scold or belittle the band of brothers and sisters, as a drill sergeant may do. He prayed to lift their spirits in God's eternal encouragement. He prays for the inner motivation to do good. He prays from heart to heart. The good hope of the gospel works love in the heart. From the

loving heart flows good deeds and good words. The band of brothers and sisters fights using God's good tactics; gospel-motivated behavior to give glory to the Father.

Brothers and sisters, stand firm in the power of prayer for each other. Paul asks for prayer from his band of brothers and sisters. **“Brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.** Some commanders remain aloof from their troops. They find fault in every detail of the soldier's lives but admit no faults of their own. They lack humility. The soldiers obey, but not willingly. Other commanders work hand-in-hand with the troops. They understand what the grunts go through. They admit their own struggles and faults. They show humility. They win respect from the men. The soldiers obey willingly.

Paul acts like that humble commander. He admits his own weaknesses. He needs help from the band of brothers and sisters as much as they need help from him. He says, “Pray for us.” He does not express confidence in himself. He needs their prayers for strength in this battle, **“pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you.** That mission wins the day. Those who hear and honor the gospel, trusting in Jesus, have left the kingdom of darkness and entered the kingdom of light. Their lives have changed by conversion. Former enemies become friends in the band of brothers and sisters. The battle advances with victories.

Pray for our gospel ministry. Pray that all our plans – as a congregation and a Synod -- will advance this mission. Pray for your pastors, that their efforts to spread the Word may win converts to honor the Word. That means also working with our inactive members who do not honor the word. Pray for our Elders who assist in this ministry. Pray for our evangelism team, and all of those share God's Word in our congregation and in our community – as well as around the United States of America and throughout this whole world.

This gospel ministry led Paul into dangerous territory and so it will today. Just observe the evil nature of our communities – as we read the paper and watch the news. This reflects a spirit of rebellion and disobedience to God-given authority. Governments and local authorities promote and distribute ideas and programs contrary to the sound doctrine of our Lord. Cults such as Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses dwell within our small community of Watertown. It demonstrates how much ongoing work we have right here. Pray for our deliverance from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith.

“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. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.” Does Paul have any doubts how God will answer these prayers? He knows that saints triumph because the Lord is on our side. Christ's perseverance will help to stand firm when these answers to prayer do not come quickly. God's love will comfort in all circumstances. Band of brothers and sisters, stand firm! Amen.