

Hold On to Faith

The community of faith, as well as individuals, can experience moments of doubt and crises of faith. Even the most faithful may suffer from what the mystics call “the dark night of the soul.” In such moments, we can turn to God, recall the divine purpose, hold on to faith, stand firm, and care for one another in God’s love.

Focus Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17

Situated on the Aegean Sea on the border between what is now Greece and Turkey, Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Because it was an important centre for trade and travel in the Roman Empire, Paul had established a church there to spread the good news of Christ. Due to the challenges of the Roman culture and persecution of the Christians, this early church struggled.

In addition, as noted in verse 2, the word was spreading that the “day of the Lord is already *here*” [“impending” in Greek] – that the end of human history was at hand. In this context, the church thought that, perhaps, it was not an advantage to be living faithfully. To quell the anxiety, the author spends the first 12 verses of chapter 2 refuting the claim that the second coming of Christ had taken place already.

Why did the Thessalonians hold this false belief? It may have been some prophetic utterance “by spirit” or “by word,” perhaps a false teaching or a forged letter from Paul. These members are reassured that a number of events must first occur before the end comes, such as “the rebellion” and the appearance of “the lawless one” (v. 3). In Hebrew Scriptures, the “lawless one” refers to arrogant foreign kings who assumed to be gods and did horrendous things to the innocent.

In verse 13, the Thessalonians are urged to hold on to the truth of their tradition and faith. Because the Thessalonians have been chosen as the “first fruits,” their salvation is assured and they need not worry.

The letter then turns to thanksgiving (verses 13–15), with high praises for being “beloved by the Lord.” Thanksgiving comes through trust in God’s activity through the Spirit in the lives of the church and its mem-

bers. By the Spirit, both the church and individual members are “sanctified” – which literally means “set apart” – for a special purpose. In other words, because of the work of the Spirit, the church finds its purpose, vitality, and meaning. In times of struggle and challenge, the church can stand firm by holding on to faith, recalling its purpose, recalling its stories, and caring for one another in the ministry of encouragement.

Pastorally, this passage provides a model on how to care for one another in time of anxiety. First, name the anxiety. Second, recall the teaching on the topic. Third, remember God’s love and salvation, then be encouraged with the confidence of faith and pray for growth.

At the heart of our faith are stories of God, who brings courage in times of trouble. **Haggai 1:15b—2:9** offers glorious promises of splendour and prosperity, but also commands, “take courage” and “work” (v. 4). **Psalms 145:1–5, 17–21** praises God’s wondrous works – justice, kindness, and hearing people’s cries and saving them. **Psalms 98** also praises God and God’s victory that reveals love. In response, a joyful noise is called for; even the sea and hills are to get into the act. **Luke 20:27–38** is a riddle about the afterlife, asked in order to trap Jesus.

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In times of crisis, we are invited to turn to God, recall God’s purpose, stand firm in faith, and care for one another in God’s love. As we journey toward the fulfillment of God’s reign, we can choose to live with faith and compassion. We can encourage one another with God’s promises. Where do you turn when life is difficult? What gives you courage to hold on to faith? In what ways might you share this hope with others?



November 7, 2010

Focus Scripture
2 Thessalonians
2:1–5, 13–17

Additional Scriptures
Haggai 1:15b—2:9
Psalms 145:1–5, 17–21
or Psalm 98
Luke 20:27–38

Seasons of the Spirit is based on **semi-continuous readings** of the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

For materials for **All Saints Day**, go to www.spiritseasons.com, click on the Library tab.

O God, sometimes we encounter challenges in our world and in our lives that tempt us to despair. Yet, it is precisely in these moments that we need you most. Help us turn to you so that we can be courageous and strong in faith. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Comfort and encouragement are commodities needed by everyone and age is no limiter. Children face new situations long before they enter school. Such situations require encouragement from the adults in their lives. These situations, whether the first day in a new school or an appointment at the dentist, may call for comforting words and a hug on the spot. The children will have little trouble understanding the feelings of the Thessalonians, even if they do not comprehend the political situation for the church.

Children, young or older, sometimes find

that a tangible item is helpful to stick in a pants pocket or tuck into a backpack. Knowing it is with them can provide comfort and boost their courage. The simple comforting message pocket reminder made in the Respond quiet zone may supply that for them.

Much is packed into the focus scripture for this session. Because of the wide range of ages in a multiage group, particular attention is focused on 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17.

Pray that the children in your group will find comfort and encouragement in the words to the Thessalonians from long ago.

November 7, 2010



Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17, and biblical background material (p. 75). What words or phrases from this letter give you hope and strength?
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 8* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase from www.spiritseasons.com.
- ❑ Bring songs "Let the People of God," "Stand, O Stand Firm," and "May Peace Be with You/Salumun Kullahee" (p. 2, 12, and 11 in *Music Section*; also on #27, #18, and #24 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *green cloth* for the Season after Pentecost, *Christ candle*, *matches*, *offering basket*, and *Bible*. Place *bookmark* at the beginning of Luke and *bookmark* at the beginning of 2 Thessalonians. Display *poster "Open Window"* so children can see it when seated.

- ❑ Bring *small stuffed, cuddly animal*.

Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell story on *today's resource sheet "Stand Firm."*
- ❑ For before and after group, bring *today's resource sheets "Stand Firm" and "Letters to Thessalonians."*
- ❑ For research group, bring *copies of today's resource sheet "Letters to Thessalonians" and directions.*

Respond

- ❑ **Art zone:** *fist-sized flat rocks, felt, craft wire, card stock or heavy paper, and hot glue gun*
- ❑ **Music zone:** *songs "Stand, O Stand Firm" and "Circle 'Round for Freedom" (pp. 12 and 11, Music Section; also #18 and #22 on Seasons Music CD)*
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** *today's resource sheet "Comforting Messages" and construction paper*
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *copies of today's resource sheet "Comforting Messages" and directions*



Hold on to Faith

Scripture

2 Thessalonians
2:1–5, 13–17

FOCUS To be assured, with the Thessalonian church, of God's comfort and care.

GATHER 1

Welcome the children and introduce guests or new children to the others. Play the song "Let the People of God" (p. 2, *Music Section*; also #27 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather at the worship table.

Opening ritual

Call to learning Light the Christ candle. Remind the group that its flame is a reminder of Jesus Christ's presence with us. Invite the children to gaze at the poster *Open Window* and repeat each line of the call to learning after you:

This is the Season after Pentecost.
During this season,
we will learn from prophets
and disciples,
from the psalm writer
and apostle Paul.
The Bible will be like a window
open to God's ways
and wisdom.

Song Play the song "Let the People of God" (p. 2, *Music Section*; also #27 on *Seasons Music CD*). Encourage the children to sing with you. During the song, receive the offering.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

Holy God, we gather here to learn about you and how to follow Jesus. May our hearts and minds be open to your teachings. Amen.

Extinguish the candle as a sign that the opening ritual is over.

Connecting with the focus

Giving comfort All children know what it means to give and to receive comfort. Hold up a small stuffed animal. Ask:

■ **Have you ever had a stuffed animal or something else that made you feel better when you were sad or worried or sick?**

Allow this question to begin a conversation about what it is to give and receive comfort. Explain that the story for today is based on a letter that was written to bring comfort to a church long ago.

2 ENGAGE

Preparing for the story

An ancient letter Invite a child to get the Bible from the worship table and open it to the first bookmark. The children will recognize this as the gospel of Luke, since they heard stories from Luke for the previous three sessions. Then have a child open the Bible to the second bookmark. Point out that this bookmark comes after the one at Luke. Read the name of the book, Second Thessalonians, to the group. Explain that after the books with the stories about Jesus, the gospels, come many letters that were written after the Resurrection in the early days of the church.

The Bible story

The church in Thessalonica Explain that the Christians in Thessalonica were facing many difficulties and had no one to whom to turn. It was a busy city with many different kinds of people. The Roman officials gave these new Christians a hard time. The writer of this letter wanted to comfort the Thessalonians. Tell the story from today's resource sheet "Stand Firm," based on 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17. Ask:

■ **What words in the letter do you think made the people feel better?**

Exploring the story further

To enable the children to explore the story further, according to interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.

Before and after group The children in this group will concentrate on how the Thessalonian Christians felt before and after receiving this comforting letter. Using the information on today's resource sheet "Letters to Thessalonians," tell about the difficult situation for the Christians in Thessalonica. Then distribute drawing paper folded in half and markers or crayons. Have the children draw how they think the Thessalonians felt, either one figure or a group. Then read the letter portion of the story on today's resource sheet "Stand Firm." Ask them to think about how the people might have felt after they read the letter. On the other side of the paper they are to draw the change they imagine.

Research group This group will learn more about the Thessalonian Christians and explore 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17, the second part of the focus scripture. Provide copies of today's resource sheet "Letters to Thessalonians" and these directions:

- 1 Take a copy of "Letters to Thessalonians."
- 2 Read "Meet the Thessalonians" at the top of the page. What three or four words might describe the life of the Christians in Thessalonica? Write them in the empty box on the page.
- 3 Read the part of the second letter to the Thessalonians on the page. When you come to an arrow, stop and read the information with the arrow. Then talk together about the question at the bottom of the page.



The Bible story and us

Play the song "Stand, O Stand Firm" (p. 12, *Music Section*; also #18 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to come together. Have the before and after group show their pictures. Invite the research group to report what they discovered about the Thessalonians. Ask:

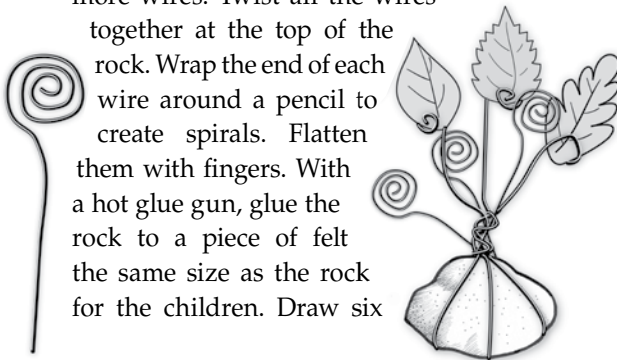
- **How can we find comfort in what we know about God?**
- **How can we share that comfort with others?**

3

RESPOND

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

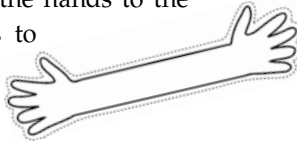
- **Art zone: Memory rocks** The Thessalonians were encouraged to remember the stories about Jesus and God's love. The memory rocks are to encourage the children to do the same. To assemble: Lay one craft wire on a table. Place rock in the middle of the wire. Bring wire up both sides of rock and twist together at the top. Repeat with two more wires. Twist all the wires together at the top of the rock. Wrap the end of each wire around a pencil to create spirals. Flatten them with fingers. With a hot glue gun, glue the rock to a piece of felt the same size as the rock for the children. Draw six



simple shapes on card stock/heavy paper and write the name of a Bible story on each one. Slip the shapes into the spirals, bending them to create a balance.

- **Music zone: Songs of courage and comfort** Music is an important source of finding courage as well as comfort. Begin with a song of courage that the children know by now, "Stand, O Stand Firm" (p. 12, *Music Section*; also #18 on *Seasons Music CD*). With the words, "stand firm" in the Bible story, this song will have additional meaning for the children. Then sing the chorus to "Circle 'Round for Freedom" (p. 11, *Music Section*; also #22 on *Seasons Music CD*). When the children can sing it easily, stand in a circle and move to the right, changing to the opposite direction each time you sing "circle."

- ❑ **Outreach zone: Hugging cards** Comfort is expressed with hugs as well as words. In this case, the hug is symbolized in a greetings card. Have the children help one another trace around each hand on construction paper. Cut them out and print a message of comfort on each hand. See today's resource sheet "Comforting Messages" for sample messages. From another sheet of construction paper cut a strip the width of the wrist. Fold it in pleats like an accordion and staple the hands to the ends. Give the cards to your pastor or people who call on sick members to distribute.



- ❑ **Quiet zone: Comforting thoughts** Children need their own words of comfort, as did the Thessalonians. Provide copies of today's resource sheet "Comforting Messages" and these directions:



Take a copy of "Comforting Messages." Follow the directions on it. Keep this reminder of God's love in a pocket or backpack.



- ❑ **Cooperation zone: Comforting others** The children will look more closely at times when they might comfort and encourage others. Give them open-ended vignettes to act out and conclude with a way to give comfort. Here are some samples, but you will want to develop some more appropriate to the children in your multiage group:
 - A bully in your class at school has been picking on a girl who just transferred from another school.
 - Your older brother and sister seem to argue with each other all the time.
 - Your neighbour is elderly and his wife died last month so he is now alone.
 - Your church is sponsoring a refugee family from a country far away who speak very little English.
 - Your cousin recently had an accident and broke a leg.



4 BLESS

Gather Play "Stand, O Stand Firm" (p. 12, *Music Section*; also #18 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather at the worship table. Light the Christ candle. Say:

The light of the candle reminds us that Jesus the Christ sent the Holy Spirit to be with us.

Play the song "May Peace Be with You" (p. 11, *Music Section*; also #24 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Invite the children to sing the parts they recognize.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

God of comfort and courage, may we remember your words of comfort for ourselves and to say them to others. Amen.

Blessing To each child say, "(Child's name), may God's words of comfort and courage be with you."

REFLECT

Which children seem most appreciative of God's comfort and care? How have you seen the children express comforting thoughts to one another?

Which Respond zones are most popular? How can you spark interest in the lesser-chosen zones?

From whom do you receive comfort and encouragement?



STAND FIRM

based on 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17

Take the time necessary to lay out the situation of the Thessalonian church before reading the letter in the story.

After Jesus died, came back to life, and then went to heaven, the followers of Jesus had to figure out what they were to do. Some returned to their homes. Others went to cities and towns to tell people about Jesus. Paul, a follower of Jesus, went to a busy town on the sea called Thessalonica. He began a church there and then went on to other places to do the same.

After some years, the Christians in Thessalonica became discouraged. Some of the people in the town didn't want to have anything to do with people who followed Jesus. They tried to make their lives miserable. The longer this went on, the lonelier and sadder the Christians became.

They wondered if this would go on forever. They wondered if they remembered the stories they had heard from Paul about Jesus as Paul told them. Most of all, they wondered if anyone remembered them and they felt terribly alone.

When they gathered together, the joy was no longer there.

One day, a letter arrived for the church. As the word spread among them, they could hardly wait to come together to read it. Finally, everyone was there. A leader of the church read the letter aloud:

Dear friends in Christ in Thessalonica,

We give thanks to God for you every day. God loves you. Do not be alarmed by false words that are spread about Jesus.

God chose you to be some of the first to believe in Jesus. Surely you are special to God. God's Spirit is with you. Now be faithful to what you were taught about Jesus and God's love. God will care for you and comfort you. Stand firm, and remember the stories we told you. They will give courage.

There was more in the letter but the people knew from just this much that they were not forgotten. They remembered that God loved them. Joy filled their hearts again. They gave loud praises and thanks to God.



LETTERS TO THESSALONIANS

Meet the Thessalonians

- The city of Thessalonica was located in Macedonia. People of many different nationalities lived in the city. At the time of the early church, Thessalonica was under the control of the Roman governors.
- The followers of Jesus in Thessalonica were having a hard time. The Jewish leaders in the city didn't want them sharing the good news of Jesus and made trouble for them. The Roman officials were upset because the followers of Jesus proclaimed that Jesus was Lord. Roman law said that only Caesar could be called Lord and the consequences for disobeying this law could be execution.
- The second letter to the Thessalonians talks about the many difficulties the little church was facing. We know from the Bible that followers of Jesus in the early church were arrested, beaten, taken away from their families, attacked in the street by mobs, stoned and left for dead, and even executed. People told lies about them, and generally tried to give the new church a bad name. This is probably the kind of treatment the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica were suffering.

Life for the Thessalonians was

What was good news for the Thessalonians?



Excerpts from a Letter (based on 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17)

¹³⁻¹⁷ My friends, the Lord loves you, and it is only natural for us to thank God for you. God chose you to be the first ones to be saved.

(In other words, they were some of the first people to believe and follow Jesus.)

His Spirit made you holy, and you put your faith in the truth.

(The word "holy" means to be set apart for a special purpose. The writer is saying the Thessalonians were set apart by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus.)

God used our preaching as his way of inviting you to share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. My friends, that's why you must remain faithful and follow closely what we taught you in person and by our letters.

(The leaders in the early church would often talk about the love of God as shown by Jesus. Most of the time they shared the stories and teachings of Jesus, but sometimes they would also refer to the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. The writer of this letter is encouraging the Thessalonians to hold onto all these stories as they go through the difficult times.)

God our Father loves us. He is kind and has given us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope. We pray that our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father will encourage you and help you always to do and say the right thing.

(Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version Copyright © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.)



Comforting Messages

Instructions for pocket reminder

- Cut out pocket reminder.
- Carefully cut slits on side flaps.
- Write messages of comfort on squares 1-3.
- Fold all the dotted lines in so messages are on the inside.
- Fasten the pocket reminder by sliding slits together. Add your name and decorate as desired.

1

Remembering God's messages of comfort can help us when we are having a hard day.

2

3

I am special to God.

God is kind and cares for me.

God will help me do what is right.

God loves me.

God will encourage me.