

Stand Firm – Norm Franke

Monday—November 14

Luke 21:5–19 *Suffering for Jesus' sake*

By standing firm you will gain life (Verse 19)

I am fascinated by the stories of Christian martyrs. At the beginning of the third century, Perpetua was on trial for being a Christian and failing to offer a sacrifice to the Emperor. At her trial, her father held up her infant child and begged Perpetua to deny Jesus and save herself for the sake of her baby. The judge agreed and promised her release if she would only perform the sacrifice. Perpetua, a new convert from a wealthy family, decided that she would stand firm. She was sentenced to be executed by wild animals and died at the hand of a gladiator's sword after surviving wounds inflicted by a bull.

Fortunately, we don't know what testing or suffering is ahead of us. Neither did Perpetua, until she found herself at the trial with the strength to make an incredible stand and be a witness and inspiration for centuries to come.

I know there have been times in my life where I simply would not have coped as I did without God's strength. God carried me through the grief of losing my parents. He felt very close at that time. The martyrs were heroes but they could stand firm because they relied on God. Their circumstances were so dire that they must have had superhuman help. That's what standing firm means: God's strength; not mine.

Challenge: Think about when you've been at the end of your tether and had to rely on God rather than your own strength. Was it through friends that He helped you, or did He speak to your heart and strengthen you?

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, that you are the one who stands firm. Thank you for loving us so much that we can bring every problem to you, especially the big ones.*

Tuesday—November 15 **Luke 21:25—36** *The coming of the Son of Man*

When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Verse 28)

A lot of young people today don't keep up with the news. My son doesn't read the paper and doesn't like to watch the news on TV. Whilst I am a bit of a news junkie and read the paper every day, I understand his position. News is mostly negative: wars; disasters; stories about ambitious and corrupt politicians, business leaders, sports stars and other celebrities. Things don't seem to be getting better. We wonder what sort of world our grandchildren will inherit.

Jesus said that this is the natural order. Some might think we are becoming a more civilised and compassionate society, with more humane laws that try to limit racism and discrimination. We think we care more for the environment and animals, we allow people to express their personal freedom and individuality. Yet there is a lot of evidence that we aren't making the progress we think we are. Just read the news.

It is interesting to see that, in these "liberated times", there are more stories of Christians and Jews facing more persecution. In the face of all this, what does Jesus say? Those who love him, who understand his teachings, (pursue justice for the oppressed, care for the loveless and return criticism and ridicule with love and compassion) are to hold their heads high when they see the troubles in our world multiplying. Our time is coming.

Challenge: How do you respond to trouble or bad news? How would your response be different if you saw God's victory in our troubled times?

Prayer: *Lord, help us to know You so well that we have faith to rejoice in your victory, even when we suffer.*

Wednesday—November 16

Exodus 14:10–31 Stand firm

Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on (Verse 15)

As well as reading the bible, I enjoy reading about the bible. Many details, such as the location of Mt Sinai and the location of the crossing of the Red Sea are known only by "tradition" and sometimes disputed. Tradition places Mt Sinai on the Sinai Peninsula and the NIV notes talk about the crossing of the Red Sea at the "sea of reeds" (literally translating the Hebrew). That description suggests that they crossed some shallow lake in the desert near Egypt.

Although nobody knows exactly where the crossing of the Red Sea really happened, some alternative theories present evidence that suggest the Israelites were at the end of the Sinai Peninsula when the Egyptian army was bearing down on them. They were trapped with nowhere to go because the Red Sea was on three sides and the army blocking their only escape path. Deliverance could only come from a supernatural event.... sounds more like the God I know.

It doesn't matter where this miracle occurred but there is no doubt this was a major event in national Israelite history. God delivered His people from what they thought was certain disaster.

Question: Can you think of a time when you were at the end of your tether and God showed up?

Question for Discussion: What was God saying to Moses in verse 15? How is that comment applicable to us?

Prayer: *Thank God for his deliverance from our problems that are often beyond our control.*

Thursday—November 17 **2 Chronicles 20:1-4,14-17** *Do not be afraid*

Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's (Verse 15)

Faith can look foolish sometimes. I have quoted the above text when talking to people who are facing their troubles. However, I've never seen anyone respond (nor have I responded) the way Jehoshaphat did. His actions in response to Jahaziel's prophecy would have never made it into any textbook on military strategy, except as a lesson in what not to do.

Jehoshaphat was informed of the enemy's position and told to take his position and stand firm. That's it. So, he sent out his minstrels in the front line singing praises to God. The enemy started fighting amongst themselves and were defeated without the Judeans having to do a thing.

I suspect the outcome would have been quite different if Jehoshaphat had told his infantry to take the front line instead of the musicians. Sometimes we do need to act and/or fight but the point is that Jehoshaphat listened to God. He didn't need to fear the circumstances because he had heard what God wanted him to do.

Challenge: Is there a problem or issue that you have been unable to resolve? Could God be telling you to let go of it so that He could deal with it? How do we know when to act, as He told Moses in yesterday's reading, or not to act, as in today's verse?

Prayer: *Help us to know You and Your Word better, so that we can follow you through every hour of the day.*

Friday—November 18 **1 John 4:1-6** *Do not believe every spirit*

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (Verse 4)

We live in a time when there are many voices calling for social change that will create a more compassionate society. Many of these changes seem to be in the name of progress. Racist remarks are now illegal, but the poorest racial minorities in all countries – western and third world – still live in abject poverty with higher crime rates and worse health outcomes. People have freedom to express their individual rights more

than ever before, but almost half of all marriages end in divorce, leaving many vulnerable children without a safe environment to be raised. Our taxes are spent on providing help for the unfortunate, but this has now become a “right” and there are now families who have several generations where no-one has worked for their living.

Amidst all of this, the church is portrayed in the media as being governed by a group of old sexual predators. Christians are those who block the popular progress of our society because of the value we place on things like human life, forgiveness, and families. It is interesting that in these times of “increasing tolerance”, the world is becoming a more dangerous place for Christians.

If we are to stand firm, we need to be strongly grounded in God’s word, so that we know what Jesus would do if he was confronted with the issues we are faced with. Jesus’ words and actions show He cared about people, not political causes. That’s not to say some causes aren’t worth supporting, but Jesus wasn’t bothered with making people feel good about “causes” – he just helped them at a personal level.

Question for discussion: St Paul had an opportunity to speak against slavery when he wrote the letter to Philemon, however he totally ignored this issue. Centuries later, an evangelical Christian by the name of William Wilberforce led the cause to abolish slavery in England. He also worked hard to educate and help freed slaves. How do we reconcile these two different approaches to an issue?

Prayer: *Lead us Lord, to do your will. Give us the discernment to know how you want us to respond to the issues we face.*

Saturday—November 19

Jude 17 – 23 A call to persevere

Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them (Verse 22a)

Our theme this week is “Stand Firm”. It might have been appropriate to write a devotion about how we should have faith and not doubt – that would be consistent with the theme, wouldn’t it? This text exhorts us to persevere and makes it clear that we should not expect to be free from doubts.

We will be scoffed at. The text says that the scoffers will divide us, they follow their own natural instincts and, clearly from the text, this appeals to some Christians. We will also be tempted in many ways.

How do we persevere through all of this? By being strong? Jude tells us to keep ourselves in God’s love (verse 21). The next verse tells us to be merciful to others. That’s how God’s love works – we are not alone in persevering, we are with caring and supportive friends.

As everyone who has given up smoking knows, gentle encouragement and support is what makes us stronger. Sometimes, we might need to be confronted on an issue, but nagging and criticism are not ways to encourage each other to persevere.

Challenge: Do you have a partner, friend or family member who needs encouragement in their faith at the moment? How can you help them?

Prayer: *Lord, we ask that your love will fill us so that we can encourage one another to remain steadfast as your disciples.*

Sunday—November 20

Psalm 141 *God is my refuge*

But my eyes are fixed on you, O Sovereign Lord; in you I take refuge – do not give me over to death. (Verse 8)

David's life was threatened on various occasions throughout his life, most memorably during the time King Saul was trying to kill him. Our lives may not be under the same sort of physical threats but, make no mistake, our faith is under attack at all times. These are direct attacks on our eternal life.

Luther warns us that there are three things we need to be on guard against: the Devil, the world and our sinful flesh (selves). Yet, rather than being "sin focused" (as Peter Steicke said in a sermon last year), our best defense is to fix our eyes on Jesus, as David says in the Psalm.

That's easier said than done. Our nature is to solve problems and, when we want to improve or grow, we see our sin as something that is holding us back. It's not. We know God has dealt with it. The reason He died on the cross was so that we could focus on Him and love others. This is a much more positive approach to life, don't you think? If only we could live like that every day and stop worrying about and trying to change what we do wrong all the time.

Challenge: How can you (really) become less "sin focused"? Not an easy challenge, I know.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you again for your grace – your totally undeserved love for us. Thank you for dealing with our sinfulness. Help us to let go of our sins and leave them with you.*

SMALL GROUP STUDY

*Share your reflections from this week's study in your small group.
What most challenged you? How have you been growing in standing firm?*