

Anchor ourselves in Christ!

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[0 : 00] Well, in your bulletin, there's also a sermon outline and you can use that to follow along as we begin our new series, thinking about the vision for our church this morning.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I just pray now that indeed you will help us to hold fast to your word and that your word today might transform us and plant deep in us your vision for us.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Change is the one constant in life, is it not? The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus certainly thought so.

He thinks of life like a river and as he says, we never step into the same river twice. The river is always flowing. So if you dip your toe into the water and then you take it out, and then one minute later you dip your water back into the river, technically it's different water.

And life like that water is always flowing, always changing. Change is the one constant in life.

Sometimes it's for the better, sometimes it's for the worse.

[1 : 17] Just this week we discovered that we're going to change our education minister. Is that for the better or for the worse? I guess we'll find out in the coming year.

And change is always unsettling, even if we know it's for the better. I suppose it's because change creates unpredictability and uncertainty.

If we change jobs, then certainly we have to deal with new colleagues whom we don't know yet, new expectations from a new boss, new SOPs and new ways of doing things.

And that can create doubt and fear. And so that's when there's a big change, whether in work or in some other area of life, we often feel anxious and maybe even a little lost.

And the reason for that is quite simple. We quite often resist what we don't know. We feel unsettled and so we want to run back to the familiar.

[2 : 18] That's completely natural, of course. But there is also a cost. If we are completely resistant to change, then it's possible that we miss out.

For a long time, Microsoft was the most dominant company in the computing world, thanks to the Windows operating system. But then the world changed, with more people beginning to use smartphones and mobile platforms, rather than just personal computers.

And Microsoft was slow to react. They stuck with what they knew. They stuck with what was familiar.

And so, as a result, they lost out to Google and to Amazon in terms of developing a dominant operating system for smartphones, as well as what is called cloud computing services.

They failed to change in time. And now they've fallen behind. And it's very possible that by resisting change, simply because it's change, we can lose out on a chance to grow and to move forward.

So, a big question is, how do we navigate change, especially when we feel unsettled? This morning, we're beginning a new year with this little series called 20-20 Vision.

[3 : 33] And what we're trying to do in this series is to gain clarity of vision. The eye doctors will tell you that if you have 20-20 vision, you can see clearly at 20 feet what can normally be seen at that distance.

In other words, they are saying that you can see clearly. And so, with this series, we are trying to gain 20-20 vision to gain clarity and sharpness.

And my hope is that the titles of the upcoming sermons already provide clarity about the direction that we want to head in, move on in maturity, join in God's mission.

Now, those are action words, aren't they? They suggest participation, movement, advancement, progression. And that's what we want, isn't it?

Let's move on as a church. Let's join in God's mission. But those are also words that imply change. And that can be scary.

[4 : 36] Especially because those words on their own can unintentionally imply that in the end, it's up to us to make this happen.

It's up to us to move forward God's church. And it can make it sound like our progress as a church boils down to our capacity, our efforts, our strength, our skills, our abilities.

But what happens if we struggle to change or we find ourselves being resistant to change? What happens if we change and then fail?

What happens if we change and things don't go the way we thought it would? Well, those kind of questions are why we're starting where we are starting this morning.

How do we navigate change, especially when we're feeling unsettled? How do we overcome our inbuilt resistance even to good change and calm our unsettled emotions?

[5 : 37] Well, before we can move on in maturity, before we can join in God's mission, there is one foundational thing that we have to do first. We have to anchor ourselves in Christ.

We have to anchor ourselves in Christ. That was exactly what the Thessalodean church were to do. Look down at verse 15 of our Bible reading today, and you can see the instruction Paul gives them. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm. Stand firm. Anchor yourselves. And I think you could make a case that that's the main command of the entire chapter.

You see, what were the Thessalonian church going through? They're in a place of change. Now, this is a young church filled with many who have just recently given their life to Christ.

And all of a sudden, as a result of their decision, they have to deal with persecution and opposition. And so they're not in calm waters. Their lives have changed.

[6 : 53] But then it gets worse. They've dealt admirably with the changes in their lives so far, but now they're becoming unsettled. Why?

Well, look back with me to 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 1-2. Paul writes, And so what was happening was that there was some sort of teaching going around, saying that the day of the Lord is already here.

Now, Paul had come earlier, teaching the Thessalonian Christians about the second coming of Christ. But now he's left, and other people have come and told this church, Guess what, guys? This has already happened. The day of the Lord has already come. And here's the implication. If Jesus has already come and gone, and you guys are still suffering and facing hardship, well, that means God has abandoned you.

He's left you behind. He's letting you drift through the storm. And so some of the Thessalonians were questioning, even possibly regretting their decision to have their lives changed by the Lord Jesus.

[8 : 39] Now, church, I don't think we're quite in the same place as the Thessalonian church at this moment. We're not facing strong persecution or opposition, certainly not on a comparable level to our brothers and sisters in places like China.

But church, what I want you to know is that every church that truly wants to follow Christ will necessarily go through what this church has to go through.

I don't mean that we'll necessarily go through exactly the same kind of persecution or opposition or false teaching. But if we are truly following Christ, we will experience events and situations and circumstances that will leave us feeling unsettled.

For every church that truly wants to follow Christ, by definition, has to change and has to navigate change as we seek to become more like Christ and to do what He wants us to do.

And that can be unsettling. But I want you to know that feeling unsettled can be a good thing. You see, if we never experience feeling unsettled and things go on as they always have, that might actually be a negative sign.

[10 : 09] Because it might mean that we're drifting as a church and Satan sees that we're no threat to his agenda. And so he happily leaves us alone, knowing that we're not moving.

We're so happy where we are. We're not changing. And certainly not for the better. And so Paul is writing to unsettled Christians navigating change.

And what he does, first of all, in chapter 2, verse 3 to 12, before our passage today, is to spend some energy rebutting these teachings. No, guys, he says, don't listen to these teachers.

The day of the Lord has not yet come because certain events haven't occurred. So don't listen to these people. But he doesn't stop there.

No, in our passage today, he turns from rebuttal to encouragement. He wants us not to worry so much about Satan's schemes, but to find sanctuary in God's truth.

[11:09] Satan might be working, but so is Jesus, who is at work building his church and changing it for the better. And so Paul is saying, Yeah, guys, I know, things can get unsettling.

But anchor yourselves in Christ and you can stand firm. So then, KEC, how can we anchor ourselves in Christ?

Well, we are about to find out. Chapter 2, verse 13 to 15, will tell us, and that's where we're going to spend the majority of our time today. But then in chapter 3, verses 1 to 5, we'll also briefly see what kind of changes God wants to make amongst those who are firmly anchored in Christ.

And then we'll wrap it all up and then we'll try to apply it to us today. And so let's begin. Here's the take-home message of 2, verse 13 to 15.

Verse 13.

[12:23] Verse 13. 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. Now, if your friend was unsettled about something, what would you do?

You might say to him, Chin up! You can get through it. Or you might say to him, Eh, worry for what? Man up lah!

Don't be a sissy. But what does Paul do? He gives thanks for who these believers are. He gives thanks for who you are if you're a believer today.

That's how he's helping you. Now, that's not an obvious strategy, is it? But you see, Paul has fundamentally grasped that when times are unsettling for believers, there is something that you and I have that can anchor us throughout.

[13:37] And that's Christ. And in these two verses, he's going to list five characteristics we have because we have Christ.

It's not an exhaustive list, but it's an amazing one. And so what we're going to do is we're going to slow down. And we're just going to take each of these characteristics one by one, so that our souls can be nourished and firmly anchored on this solid and beautiful truth.

So here's characteristic number one. We are loved by the Lord. Now, pastors say that all the time, so much so that it can almost become a meaningless statement.

But let's take a moment. Say this in your head. I am loved by the Lord. God loves me.

Say that in your head. He's seen me as nobody else has. He's seen me when I haven't been able to portray a shiny, pretty picture of myself to others.

[14:47] He's seen me when I've been at my absolute worst and ugliest. He's seen me when I've chosen not to see him, but to turn my back on him.

And he loves me. He didn't just pity me. He didn't just show me sympathy. He loves me. How do I know that?

Well, I can do no better than to simply repeat the eloquent meditations of Thomas Brooks, a preacher from the 17th century. That Christ should come from the eternal bosom of the Father to a region of sorrow and death.

That he who was roped with glory should be wrapped with rags of flesh. That he who filled heaven should be cradled in a manger. That the God of Israel should have to flee to Egypt.

That the God of strength should be wary. That the judge of all flesh should be condemned. That the God of all life should be put to death. And all this for fallen humans, for miserable humans, for worthless humans, is beyond the thought of all created natures.

[15:59] We know he loves us because while we were still his enemies, Christ did all this. Christ died for us.

His love for us is unearned and patient. The Christian counselor, David Paulison, says that it's best to think of God's love not so much as unconditional, but contra-conditional.

Because God did not love me for who I am, but God loves me despite who I am. Even as he loves me enough to begin changing me.

You see, in Christ, God didn't just tolerate you. You know, sometimes in the back of our minds, we might think, oh, God saved me. So I kind of guess he has to kind of love me a little bit. But that's miles away from the biblical picture of God's love.

He doesn't just tolerate us. Instead, he calls us sons and daughters. I know. I too often don't get it either.

[17 : 11] It would just take us an entire lifetime to understand his love. But God loves us deeply. We're loved by the Lord.

Number two. We're chosen as firstfruits. Now, sometimes people get a bit uptight whenever they hear the word chosen or election or predestination in the Bible because it sounds to them like a lottery.

It sounds like God stuck his hand into a random box filled with our IC numbers and then those he came up with are those that he decided to pick to come to him.

And that's about as impersonal as you can get. But once again, that's as far from the truth as we can get. Paul says, God chose you.

And then he says, thank you. Why? Because Paul remembers his Old Testament scriptures.

[18 : 20] He remembers Hosea, who quotes God as saying, I will call them my people who are not my people. I will call her my loved ones who is not my loved one.

He remembers Jesus who said, I know my sheep and they follow me. I give them eternal life and no one will ever snatch them out of my hand.

These are not the ones, the words of someone who chose people at random. These are the words of someone filled with compassion.

And he chose you. These are the words of a God who saw what you were going to be like, blind and going your own miserable way.

And then he chose personally to restore to you the joy of knowing him. I'm convinced that the longer we continue as Christians, the more that we will echo what the Baptist preacher Spurgeon once said.

[19 : 28] I'm quite sure that if God had not chosen me, I would never have chosen him. And when we first become Christians on one level, we obviously chose him.

But the mystery is that as we grow as Christians and begin to realise more the depth of our sin, we begin to work out that yes, we chose him, but that's because he chose us first.

Number three, we are safe. We are safe. I'm not going to spend too much time on this one because as we head into Good Friday and Easter, we'll spend more time unpacking the riches of what the Bible says about salvation.

But I will say this, it's another word that we use so much that we take it for granted, is it not? But just imagine that you're one of those 12 boys trapped in that Thai cave back in 2018 as the waters begin to rise.

If no one comes for you, you know you're dead. But thankfully, someone did come. those Thai Navy SEAL divers heroically dive in to save you and swim you out one by one at risk to their own lives.

[20 : 58] They save you. And in fact, two of them ended up giving their very lives to do so. From now on, you identify yourself as someone who should have died, but you have been saved.

And I don't think you take that for granted. I don't think you will forget your rescuer. I don't think you will forget that your salvation came at a price. And that changes you.

That becomes part of your identity. Well, the truth is, we are like those Thai boys. We were in a cave as good as dead and Jesus gave his life to save us.

number four. We are sanctified. We are sanctified. Now, whenever pastors and theologians use the word sanctify, they usually mean growing in holiness, growing in purity, growing to be more like Jesus.

And that's the usual meaning of the word sanctify. But that's not the only meaning of sanctification. And it probably isn't quite the meaning intended here.

[22 : 12] To be sanctified also means that we used to be set apart from God, but now we are set apart for God. Our position before God has changed.

At home, we have a couple of monks from the Kuching Autistic Association. One of them has a picture of a bell on it. Now, let's say I tell my family, okay, from now on, no one brings out of that mug except me.

You can use all the other mugs in the household, but that one belongs to me alone. What have I done? I've sanctified the cup.

I've set it apart for my own use. I've claimed it as exclusive to me. And that is probably the sense meant here.

This is who we are. God has claimed us as his own through the Holy Spirit. And now we're meant to serve him exclusively as his instrument.

[23 : 26] This is who we are. And finally, number five, we will be glorified. We will be glorified.

What does that mean in a nutshell? I like how one writer puts it. It means, he says, that we will shine like the sun. And Paul is telling us, this is our destiny.

You know, it's hard to imagine now, but one day we will really be like Jesus. we can look forward to the day when sin is no longer part of us.

And that means we can enjoy Jesus to the fullest, since sin is no longer obstructing our relationship with him. And it also means that we will one day share in his throne.

That's what Revelation 3, verse 21, tells us, that Jesus says we will sit with him where he is. We will reign with him.

[24 : 35] And so in just two verses, Paul has just described God's purposes for us from eternity past all the way to eternity future. You are loved, you have been chosen, you are saved to be sanctified so that ultimately you will be glorified.

this is what you have been called to. But of course, and this is so, so, so, so important, this is who you are only if you know the truth, only if you believe the gospel.

That's what the end of verse 13 and the beginning of verse 14 makes clear. You are loved, you have been chosen, you are saved to be sanctified so that ultimately you will be glorified through the gospel.

And then, and only then, verse 15, Paul says, stand firm. For just imagine if Paul had never said verses 13 to 14 but just jump straight to verse 15.

Imagine if he just said, yes, I know you guys are feeling very unsettled and alarmed by all the hard things that are going on, all these changes, but just stand firm, guys, just stand firm.

[26 : 06] How would we feel? And we might still feel overwhelmed, it's just too much. Or we might feel jaded, or we think, oh, there Paul goes again, telling us to stand firm, telling us that it's all up to us.

But Paul doesn't do that. Instead, he reminds us of the privileges of the gospel. You are loved, you have been chosen, you are saved to be sanctified so that you will be glorified.

And that's why we can stand firm, anchor yourself in Christ. and you won't feel unsettled, no matter how things around you change, for better or for worse.

Or to use the language of our core convictions, Paul is simply saying, stay gospel centred. And he says, anchor yourselves in Christ by holding fast to his word, verse 15.

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we pass on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. Hold fast to my teachings, the teachings that I receive from Jesus and the other apostles, Paul says.

[27 : 33] Get a firm grip on it. To anchor ourselves in Christ, we need to anchor ourselves in the word of God. Why? Because when we anchor ourselves in the word of God, we will constantly be reminded of the privileges of the gospel, as we've just heard.

And we will be less vulnerable to the winds of force, teaching we can stand firm. And when we stand firm and anchor ourselves in Christ, and hold fast to his unchanging word, well, we can deal with the changes that God wants from us.

Because, you see, God does want us to change. He has an agenda. And that agenda is contained in chapter 3 verses 1 to 5, when we see what Paul prays for.

It's the agenda that God wants for every church. It's the agenda God wants for KEC. And so, what are those agenda items? Here's agenda item number one, the advance of the gospel in the world. Notice Paul's prayer request in 3 verse 1. As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.

[28 : 53] He wants the gospel to go out as far as it can. Now, that phrase, spread rapidly, is more literally, run swiftly. The idea here is that the gospel has lakes running from one household to the next, from one village to the next.

And so, perhaps Paul is thinking of the gospel a little bit like an athlete who is running as fast as he can to win the prize. Or even possibly, a messenger who is returning home from the battlefield, shouting with, won!

The king has triumphed with set free. And this is what Paul wants to happen with the word of the gospel. He wants to see it run from place to place to place.

And that's what every church who anchors themselves in Christ wants. We want to see the gospel go out, to see it receive well, for it to succeed, so to speak.

We want to see increasing numbers of people turn to Christ as they repent and believe the good news. And if we at KEC want to reach the world, well, that means changing our priorities, changing our patterns of life, changing our propensity to be timid.

[30 : 11] And for such change to happen, well, we need to pray. There's no other way. For did you notice that phrase at the end of verse 1 ?

Just as it was with you. And so God wants what happened to the Thessalonian church to happen everywhere else in the world.

God wants what happened to the Thessalonian church to happen in Kuching. Now, what happened to the Thessalonian church? How did they respond when the word of God came to them?

Well, to know that, we've got to turn back briefly to one Thessalonians. Have a look with me at 1 verse 6 and notice how they received the message. You became imitators of us and of the Lord and welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

And so the Thessalonian church responded with joyful repentance. In chapter 2 verse 13, it says that they received the message not as the word of man but as the word of God.

[31 : 22] Now, it wasn't easy for them. They were in the midst of suffering but they said, yes, Lord, we want to get on board. And they proved it.

in 1 verse 9 to 10, others tell of how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead.

And so the Lord's message was honored not just with words but with action. They turned from their idols. And now Paul says, pray that others will receive the message the same way the Thessalonians did.

Pray that people in Kuching will receive the message the way the Thessalonian church did. Pray that the word will spread and that the Holy Spirit will work and all will fall in awe of the living God.

But at the same time, Paul says, don't be naive in your prayers. Verse 2, and pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people for not everyone has faith.

[32 : 33] Paul says that the gospel will not go out without opposition. There will be people who will do anything to stop the message from going out. They might be people from outside the church who obviously hate the gospel.

But they might even be people from within the church who don't understand that the gospel is top priority for any church but who rather prioritize their own comfort.

For not everyone has faith. And these opponents don't necessarily play fair. They might manipulate others to their cause.

They'll use underhanded methods. And so Paul says, don't just pray for the gospel message but also for gospel people. Pray for gospel preachers and gospel messengers that they will be protected physically and spiritually.

And then Paul turns to agenda item number two. The continual strengthening of God's church. The continual strengthening of God's church.

[33 : 39] You see, remember earlier who we are in Christ? We're safe but we're not just safe. God has sanctified us. He set us apart for his use.

And so God isn't just interested in people coming to faith. and then that's it. No, he wants to see people continue on to have our hearts and our minds conform to him and be of use to him.

Evangelism is the starting point not the end goal. And that's exactly why Paul prays verse 5. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance.

It's also why he prays chapter 2 verse 16 to 17. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and by his grace gave us internal encouragement and good hope encourage your hearts and strengthen you, notice that, in every good deed and word.

God. And that's why he says in verse 4 that he's confident that they will obey the commands of God because he wants to see them live up to his confidence that he has in them, that they will be obedient to God's word.

[35 : 04] And so as a church anchored in Christ, that's what we want to see as well. People being strengthened in faith as they not just listen to the word, but as they obey what the Bible says.

That should be our constant prayer. We should continually pray verse 5, that God will constantly direct us more and more into God's love. We should pray that when God says that he's given us

encouragement and hope, in chapter 2, verse 16 to 17, that those are not just words on the page to us, but those are things that are embedded into our hearts.

We should pray that as we anchor ourselves in Christ, that we kindle our hearts afresh to persevere for the sake of his name. And we pray that God's love for us would be a living reality and that would cause you and I to love him.

For when that happens, obedience is no longer a duty, but a delight. Now, isn't that what we want for our church? So let's begin to wrap things up.

What do all these things mean for our church? Well, firstly, let's come back to the theme that I already introduced this morning. Change. And as I said already, change is inevitable.

[36 : 27] That's just how life works. Nothing stays exactly the same, especially as we get older. Our kids become adults and move away.

Our bodies are no longer so cooperative. The places that we used to hang out at have evolved or are no longer there. And when things are changing all around us, sometimes we get unsettled, especially if the pace of change becomes faster and faster.

better. But as a result, sometimes, subconsciously, what happens is that because we see all these changes around us, we get unsettled, and so we look to church as our anchor, as our comfort zone, hoping that it will stay exactly the same.

You know, the service times, the songs, the way things are done, the people in our home groups. It's like our comfort blanket on a rainy day. It's become our anchor.

And as I said already, that's completely understandable. But there is a danger. The danger is that we've made the wrong thing our anchor. We've made an idea of church, not Christ, our anchor.

[37 : 46] And only Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so as a result, sometimes we resist change in church simply because the changes are not what we're used to, although it's for the better.

You see, we've just heard that God wants us to hold fast to his word, and to prioritize reaching the world, and to prioritize strengthening the church.

But that means that sometimes things in the church have to change if we want to remain faithful to God's agenda to do what he wants us to do.

Sometimes ways of doing things that could have reached the world 20 years ago are no longer so effective. And so to maintain that priority, we have to change.

Sometimes we realize that our understanding of God's word is not quite right, and so we need to be corrected. Just like the Thessalonians' understanding of Jesus' second coming had to be corrected.

[38 : 54] You know, if we were to read on in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, we would discover that the Thessalonian Christians had to change their working patterns so as to remain faithful to what Paul had taught them.

You see, as they held fast to God's word, they made the necessary changes. And over these past few years, I know there have been changes.

Some very simple, surface-level ones, like having a Bible reading before the sermon, new website, going to have a new kitchen, some new songs.

Perhaps others that are a little more substantial, having a new Sunday school curriculum, introducing Christianity Explored as our main evangelistic course. Perhaps the most substantial change you had in the last four years is this, and trusting me with the responsibility to be your pastor, even though I'm the age of many of your children.

Thank you. And the truth is, to move forward, more changes are inevitable. There might be changes in the way we do things. For example, with the usher training coming up, there might be things there that might be a bit different.

[40 : 11] There might be changes in terms of people. as non-Christians become Christians, and people with no prior contact with us make our church their home.

And so what happens is you begin to see more unfamiliar faces. It's no longer just so-and-so's kid. There might be changes in what we emphasize as our goals, not just mere activities, but disciple making.

And maybe all this can feel unsettling to you. But if you anchor yourselves in Christ, and remember that the main agenda is to see the gospel go out into the world, and to see our church strengthened, then you can navigate those changes.

Because you know it's all about Christ, and it's all for him. We remember that he never changes. He loves us, he's working in us. And when we're centered on Christ, when we're gospel-centered, we can remain faithful to his agenda as well, and change accordingly.

Now, what else does this passage say to us? In many ways, it says nothing new. Paul talks about word and prayer. Those have always been the fundamentals.

[41 : 32] But this passage says to us, don't neglect them. Fundamentals are essential. Think of the world's best badminton and basketball players. Every day in training, they're still practicing the fundamentals.

They're doing the same drills, practicing the same strokes, shooting basket after basket, refining their footwork. It's how they strengthen their game.

And God has made it clear that word and prayer are the fundamentals of the Christian life. And so how are we doing at the fundamentals? I imagine we can still do better.

And so let's make a renewed effort to immerse ourselves in word and prayer. It's one reason why those devotionals are on sale today. It's to help us to get into the word and to pray.

Next week, I'll mention a new initiative we'll try out this year to help us to go deeper into the word.

And so let's be a church faithful to God's agenda. It's about getting the gospel into the world.

[42 : 38] It's about the strengthening of God's church. And you might have noticed that's more or less what we're going to talk about in the next two weeks although we use different words.

But let's begin this new year by anchoring ourselves in Christ. 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 to every good word and deed. Let's pray. Father, as we come to you, we just pray, Lord, that you will set us on fire once again.

Will you help us to see that we are loved by you, that we have been chosen by you to be saved, that you are at work sanctifying us, and that you call us to this through your gospel that we might share in the glory of the Lord Jesus.

And so this year, will you help us to stand firm, will you help us to hold fast, will you help us to anchor ourselves in Christ, to hold fast, first and foremost, to the Lord Jesus, and that together, as one church, as one body, we will want to move forward to make whatever changes are necessary, so that we can live as your disciples and bring the gospel into this world.

[44 : 16] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.