

**Monday, July 13, 2020**

**SERIES: CHARACTER OVER COMPROMISE**

**SPEAKER: NAT CRAWFORD**

**TITLE: Standing Firm Pt. 1**

In the musical *Les Miserables*, there is a gut-wrenching song called “*I Dreamed a Dream*.” If you haven’t experienced this musical, I encourage you to. It is a story of redemption, forgiveness and second chances. In this song, the character Fantine reflects on the curveballs of life that have been thrown at her.

She was a young woman in love. She believed her life would be full and bright, but then reality hits. She is pregnant and abandoned. She’s now estranged from her daughter with little hope for her future. She reflects, “I had a dream my life would be; So different from this hell I'm living; So different now, from what it seemed. Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.”

I have no doubt that each person listening today has their own dream in time gone by, that now is no more. You dreamed a dream that you’d be with your spouse, *‘til death do you part*, but now they are off fulfilling that promise with someone else. You dreamed a dream that your child would grow up happy and healthy, but instead, they’ve battled unexplainable health issues. You dreamed a dream that you’d be a tenured professor, but instead, you are now bagging groceries for minimum wage. You dreamed a dream, you’d graduate top of your class, but now you are struggling to graduate. You dreamed a dream, you’d be married, but instead you eat dinner by yourself most nights.

We’ve all been thrown curveballs, some more than others; some more devastating than others. Regardless, we’ve all dealt with broken dreams. But do the broken dreams - the curveballs - need to defeat us? Is the only resolution to give up? I don’t think so. At least, not for the Christian. I believe regardless of the curveballs of life, we can stand firm. We can stand firm by deepening 3 anchors. That’s what we are going to talk about today.

If you this is your first time listening today, we are in a series called “Character Over Compromise”. You and I as believers will come to forks in the road. We will have a choice to make. Will we choose character, or will we choose compromise?

When you and I were saved, we were saved on purpose and for a purpose. Salvation is not just a one-way ticket to Heaven. It is a ticket to soul transformation and life transformation. It makes a real difference not just in eternity, but it has an impact on today.

So each day, we will have choices to make. Regardless whether it's COVID-19 or injustice; it doesn't matter if it's a health diagnosis; or whether it's an unexpected bill, we all will have a choice to make. Whether we respond in faith to God, or whether we respond in fear, it is the choice of character or compromise. So we are looking at different elements of the Christian faith;

different ways we can manifest the reality of who we are in Christ. And today, it is all about standing firm when the curveballs of life come our way. So, we are going to spend our time in First Thessalonians, Chapter 3, beginning in verse 6.

In verses 4 and 5, Paul tells us when he was with the Thessalonian Church, he warned them of problems and persecution that would come. Now away from them, Paul sends his companion Timothy to them, to check up on them; to make sure they aren't giving up and leaving their faith. He says he was afraid that the tempter, that is Satan, had worked them over. This thought bummed out Paul. So he sends Timothy to check on them, and Timothy has returned to Paul. And that's where we pick it up in verse 6 (NLT):

**<sup>6</sup> But now Timothy has just returned, bringing us good news about your faith and love. He reports that you always remember our visit with joy and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you. <sup>7</sup> So we have been greatly encouraged in the midst of our troubles and suffering, dear brothers and sisters, because you have remained strong in your faith. <sup>8</sup> It gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord. (Vs. 6-8)**

Timothy's message is "good news" to Paul. The church is doing well in their faith and love. They are standing firm in the midst of troubles and curveballs. It's in verses 7-8 we find that first anchor to stand firm when curveballs come: **Deepen your faith.**

I've noticed something about a lot of Christians. Their faith is a mile long, but an inch deep. They accepted Jesus Christ as Lord as Savior when they were kids. They go to church. They go to Sunday School. They become adults and someone challenges their faith, or they experience a curveball in the form of a breakup in a relationship, or financial trouble, or sickness, and their faith is rocked. It happens all the time. It's happened to me.

I mean, why is it we are so confident God can handle our salvation, but the curveballs of life, we just don't know if God can or will help us? Why is that? Well, I think it's because we haven't deepened our faith. Maybe we've never deepened our faith, because we've never been shown how. Or maybe we've not taken the right steps to deepen our faith.

That reminds me of a story:

*A pastor, an evangelist, and a minister were in a rowboat in the middle of a pond fishing. None of them had caught anything all morning. Then the evangelist stands up and says he needs to go to the bathroom, so he climbs out of the boat and walks on the water to shore. He comes back ten minutes later the same way. Then the minister decides he needs to go to the bathroom too, so he climbs out of the boat and walks on the water to shore. He, too, comes back the same way ten minutes later. The pastor looks at both of them and decides that his faith is just as strong as his fishing buddies, and that he can walk on water too. He stands up and excuses himself. As he steps out, he makes a big splash down into the water. The evangelist looks at the minister and says, "I suppose we should have told him where the rocks were."*

So maybe you've taken off blindly and sank in your Christian faith. I'm sure you've heard me say this, but our faith was never meant to be a blind faith. Our faith was never meant to be based on feeling. I'm not saying that our faith isn't experiential, because surely it is. But if our faith was

meant to be solely based on feelings, I don't think anyone's faith would last. You should have to have reason to believe. Well, there are plenty of substantiated reasons for you to believe in Jesus, and we'll talk about those in more detail in just a moment.

## **DISCUSSION:**

N: This brings us to discussion time with my friends, Cara Whitney and Arnie Cole. Cara, Jesus told Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Why do you believe?

C: Well, I think what Jesus told Thomas is really exciting, because anyone today, anyone listening, can have as much confidence believing without seeing, as those disciples did, who saw and believed. So there is evidence for the Resurrection; there's historical evidence, scientific evidence, as well as human nature, how humans respond to certain things. Once you open yourself up to the possibility that it could be true, then it just opens amazing things that you're going to find and see. And so I pulled it apart, all of these things, the Resurrection specifically, and found it to be true. And then I made a choice in how I wanted to respond to that information. But for me, the biggest proof was how the disciples responded. You know, they ran scared for their lives after Jesus was arrested. And then they went into hiding, but they stopped running, and I believe it was because three days later, they saw the resurrected Jesus. And that really stuck with me; that was the thing I couldn't get rid of.

N: Well, and isn't it interesting? I mean, some people can say, "Well, yeah, sure. Maybe a disciple, you know, he saw something, and turned around", but what you just pointed out is the fact that no, they all stopped. They all turned around. [Yeah]. And then you look at the conversion of the skeptics, you know, James and Paul, and then you just look at the record in First Corinthians 15, over 500 people saw a risen Christ. And so you look at the evidence and it's compelling to move people to a position of belief, but yet we know some people won't believe. And that's really frustrating for those of us who love and care about our friends and family so much. Arnie, I think this brings up a good discussion point though. Can there be true faith without reason?

A: Boy, that's a great question, Mr. Theologian, young pastor. I know for me, either Jesus was the biggest liar, or He really is what He says He is. I mean, that's really the question, and who needs to answer that for you? Well, did Jesus just pull off this big old lie for everybody, and fooled these thousands of people, or do you take Him at His word? He came to save the world, not condemn it.

N: I think that was beautifully said, and this may surprise you, for me to say this as the apologist, but I think that you can have faith without reason. And the reason is, because it's the Holy Spirit who does the saving. [Right.] We know that there's nothing that we can do to convince anyone into the Kingdom of Heaven. There's nothing that we can do to love anyone into the Kingdom of Heaven. However, we are called to, as Paul says, scatter seed and to water; we're to go and deliver the Gospel. But at the end of the day, it's the Holy Spirit who does the saving. And so I think you're right. There is faith without reason. And in fact, that's really what

the mechanism is: the power of the Holy Spirit. But we do know that God uses reason to remove any obstacles from people seeing Jesus clearly. So I think you're exactly right.

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What's your reason to believe in Jesus? Have you ever thought about that?

Think about 2 of the pillars of the early church, Paul and James. They each started off as skeptics, if not cynics. First, think about the Apostle Paul. We know the Apostle Paul was a persecutor of the church. He had no love for the church; he had no tolerance for the church; he didn't like Jesus Christ; he didn't like what Jesus Christ stood for. Paul was a religious zealot, a Pharisee of the purest and best kind. But for some reason, he would give up his prestige, his influence, whatever wealth he had, whatever power he had, all for the sake of the Gospel. Why? Why would he do that? Was it more money? Was it more power and authority? Was it because if he signed up today, he got a free T shirt, or maybe a gift card? No. According to Acts 9, as Paul - who was originally known as Saul - was on the Damascus road, and who did he encounter? He encountered a risen Jesus Christ. He was not persuaded by feelings. He was not persuaded by hope. He had a reason to believe. He saw and encountered a risen Christ.

The second person to consider is James. James was the half-brother of Jesus. Do you realize that James did not believe that his brother was the Messiah? He did not believe that Jesus was God in the flesh. Am I sure? I am. John 7:5 declares this, saying, "For not even his brothers believed in him." And isn't that hard to believe? I mean, can you imagine being the brother of Jesus? That would be really hard. Whenever Jesus was shooting hoops in the backyard, he drained each shot. Each time he made eggs over easy, the yolks never broke. Or, c'mon, think about behavior. James and Jude are fighting in the yard, and Mary comes out and delivers the usual, "Boys! Boys! What would Jesus do?" I mean, they would have had to realize something was unique about Jesus. And maybe they did. However, they did not believe He was the Messiah. That is until, at least it seems, until He appeared alive from the dead. And from that moment on, James would go from skeptic to church planter. Amazing.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. Nat, what about the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit. Isn't it the Spirit who does the saving? You better believe it is. Paul punches this point in 1 Corinthians 3 (ESV):

Paul writes, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor" (3:5-8).

You see, we are called to live life intentionally, in the places God has put us: Being a light in the darkness; Scattering the seeds of the Gospel, and watering those seeds with our lives. But it is God who does the saving.

Now, again, I know some of you are thinking, doesn't God choose us? Yes, he does. Ephesians 1, Romans 8, John 6 and other passages teach this. So does our free will and God's sovereignty

work together? Yes, even so, I do not know how. It is a mystery. But that's why God is God, and I am not.

So again, maybe you got saved and went off without proper understanding of evidence, of theology, of discipleship. Well, you're not alone. That's why we do what we do here at Back to the Bible. Maybe you're like many of us, and you've gotten a bit lazy or distracted. I mean, c'mon. We've got 1000 reasons today to get distracted. Smart phones are killing our productivity. Entertainment through social media, Netflix, and YouTube pull us away from the richness of God's Word.

I truly believe the Bible is one of the most exciting books to read. It has more hope, redemption, tragedy, blood, action, and love than any movie or show on HBO or Amazon Prime. But the best part is the principles in it, which are timeless. The stories are all true and have meaning and application. Nothing compares. So today, it's our call as Christians to come back to the Bible. In other words, you need to get back into spiritual shape and deepen your faith.

So as Paul said in 1 Timothy, we need to train for godliness and deepen our faith. So if you're going to deepen your faith, the first thing you need to do is ...

**Study God's Word.** I know what some of you are thinking: Preachers and pastors always tell us read our Bible and study God's Word. Why yes, yes we do. Why? Well, first – Scripture is God-breathed and is for the training in righteousness. It is God's Word. Second, we tell you to study Scripture, because God has told us to in the Bible. **Joshua 1:8 says “you shall meditate on it day and night.”** And last, we tell you to, because the majority of Christians admit to not reading Scripture, and complain they don't know how to think biblically. So get into the Bible. Read a chapter a day. Subscribe to our Daily Devotional or one of our reading plans. You can find these at [backtothebible.org](http://backtothebible.org).

Have you ever checked out goTandem? GoTandem is our free app that feeds you Scripture and content at the times you want, at the frequency you want, to help you move closer to Jesus today than yesterday. It allows you to customize the content based on your areas of struggle or deficiency, and provides you the biblical steroids to grow in godliness. It provides you the theological jet fuel to become more like Christ each day. GoTandem is completely free and available for download at your convenience. But don't just study it alone. Join a Bible study and study together. God made us for relationships, and there's not a more intimate relationship than the ones you do with biblical community.

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N: Well, speaking of biblical community, Arnie and Cara are here with me to weigh in on today's message. Arnie, we have listeners today who are anything but social butterflies. Why should they step out of their comfort zone to be part of a community?

A: Because as Christ followers, that's what we're called to do, is to move beyond ourselves. And it's not just about your own salvation. Yes, you work your salvation throughout your life, and you start becoming sanctified, but it's also about going and reaching out to other people, your neighbors, other countries. There's a huge, huge challenge.

N: I heard a pastor once say, you can live alone, but you can't thrive alone. And I think that's part of the reason why God says, you know, be part of the community, no matter what your personality style is. But I think your assessment of the Word is spot on. And I think we as believers need to take it at face value. And you've done that today.

Cara, Joshua, 1:8 says we should “meditate on God's word day and night”. How do you meditate on God's Word day and night?

C: For me personally, I have the luxury of writing about God, which would be another way to maybe say journaling. I'm also involved with this podcast. And so when I read my Bible, that's my Bible study time. But as far as quiet time with God, I like apps, so goTandem, who we're involved with. I also like to listen to the Bible being read to me while I'm doing things, so folding clothes, cleaning up after my horses. It's just nice, because then you can just let it soak in and it stirs your soul. But I have a restless quest to know more. One of the first things I did though, when I became a new believer, was to join a Bible study group, because I wanted to know more. And I also knew that I needed to be around other believers.

N: I think at the core of your meditation, it is God's Word, but how you do that, and the portion size, and the time of day, all those things vary, based on what you're doing and where you're at. And I think that's true for all of us today. We need to not be so worried about, “Well, if I don't read one chapter a day chronologically, or one chapter a day, or one book a day, then I'm hosed.” I don't think that's right. I think there's benefit to reading at least a thought at a time, or maybe a longer portion of Scripture, but God has given us His Word to consume in a lot of different ways. And as you said, goTandem is one of the best ways we know how today.

Arnie, think about James, the brother of Jesus. Jesus was right there in front of him every day. And yet we know he didn't believe until later on. Can you relate to that posture of James seeing Jesus and yet not believing right away?

A: Oh yeah. I mean, Jesus is in front of us all every day, and many of us don't believe, or assign something else to it. So yeah, I can totally relate. And as I look, even as a Christ follower, bad things that I thought were so terrible, a few months later, you see, “Oh wow, Jesus was there. He was directing everything. I'm such an idiot. I didn't recognize it at the time and went through all kinds of suffering and stress. And Jesus was there the entire time.”

N: You're exactly right. God is there; Christ is there; everything is being orchestrated together for a purpose. And think about the time we live in today, whether it's COVID-19, or masks, or injustice, or racism, or politics, I mean, you name it, we are living in history. It is a momentous occasion. So I want to ask you guys, as we wrap up our time, what good do you think our nation is experiencing now through the trials that we're going through?

C: Well, everything that we're experiencing right now, is a reminder that we're not in control of any of it, and that's not a bad thing. I think it keeps us humble, and it keeps us dependent on God. And it's a good time to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with people who may be afraid, or short on peace. People need peace right now.

N: Excellent. What about you, Arnie?

A: My take is, back in the day, in the sixties, seventies and eighties, the hardest person to convince to follow Jesus was the cultural Christian, because they thought they already were a Christian. So I take this day and age: We're not a Christian nation. It's much harder to be a cultural Christian when there's persecution; in other countries, Christians, Christ followers, come to the plate. They show up and it promotes people into action. So I think, as messed up as things are, I think it's really good for us Christ followers.