

Embracing the Word

"Amplify" Series, January 17 & 18, 2026 | 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2:17-3:7 [2:13-3:13]

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Do you live in a Fortress of Solitude?

Superman has a hideout no one else can find or enter.

I don't read comic books, but I grew up going to Superman movies. And in the Superman movies, his Fortress of Solitude was a giant, crystal fort created by his father as a place to store memories of his home planet and for him to get away and reflect. It was protected by being in the Arctic. It has a key that only Superman can carry. And it has an elaborate security system with protective robots. In the Fortress of Solitude, Superman's heritage, his most important possessions, and his biggest secrets are all safe. His heart is safe. Almost. Because no fortress is ever perfectly safe.

Sometimes we build a Fortress of Solitude around ourselves.

We imagine that there are dangers all around us—people who will disappoint us, hurt us, even betray us. We may think that there are dangers all around us because we have been hurt before. So, we pull back. Put up protective walls. Install a security system.

But what happens to us when nothing can get in?

No new ideas can get in; we assume that we know everything we need to know. No new people can get in; we won't be vulnerable. Not again.

When nothing can get into our lives, that leaves God outside.

We close the doors on the fortress of our lives. We will not let the Spirit of God through the cracks. We refuse to let the Word of God in through the windows. God will not cause us to think something different. There will be no new routines. We won't consider what He has to say about the ways that we spend money, use our time, or talk. We won't let God surprise us. We are a Fortress of Solitude, and God is locked out.

Can you shut down something you've carefully constructed to protect yourself?

You've put up the walls, so no one else is keeping them there. They're defending you, but they're isolating you. Depriving you of everything you could have in Christ. You don't need a Fortress of Solitude, and Paul shows us how to shut it down.

Disciples call off the attack robots.

Attack robots protect Superman's Fortress of Solitude.

In the most recent Superman movie, there's a squadron of robots in the Fortress of Solitude. They're caretakers of the Fortress, helpers to Superman, and a lethal force ready to take down any enemy that threatens the fortress. Do your own defense mechanisms swarm when you feel like a challenging idea

or a new person threatens to slip through your defenses? Are your attack robots on high alert right now?

Paul wondered if the Thessalonians had deployed attack robots when he left town quickly.

Paul and the team left Thessalonica quickly after trouble broke out. They were in more danger than any of the local leaders. Paul, Silas, and Timothy went first to Berea. Then Paul went on to Athens. In Athens, he kept worrying about the disciples in Thessalonica. He knew they were facing continuing opposition and persecution. Their discipleship wasn't complete when he left. Had they turned on him? Turned their inner attack robots on their faith? Paul was restless to find out.

Paul dispatched Timothy to check on the Thessalonians.

In **1 Thessalonians 3:1-2** we read:

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith ...

Paul had heard what sounded like good news—people were talking about the faith of the disciples in Thessalonica. Still, he was worried that the Thessalonian disciples might have activated those old defense systems. Attack robots might be there to chase away memories of Paul, his Gospel, and his God.

But Timothy reported that the Thessalonians had embraced Paul's message.

Paul recounts Timothy's return in **1 Thessalonians 3:6-7** and following:

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

The word was clear: The Thessalonian disciples had abandoned their Fortress of Solitude. They had embraced Paul, his Gospel, and his God. They were still following Jesus Christ and making more disciples.

Where do we deploy attack robots?

Our defenses go up to protect us from church people; we've heard that they are brothers and sisters in Christ, but we don't trust them and aren't ready to let them in. Our defenses activate when the Bible gives us a picture of God we can't understand—when God is either too giving or too demanding. We deploy the attack robots when we think about something that's uncomfortable or unfamiliar—like God whispering to us that we should go on a mission trip, be truly generous with our money, or share our faith. We think, "I'm smarter than that" or "I won't do that." And the attack robots start circling to keep our Fortress of Solitude safe. But the Thessalonians had a chance to send out their attack robots, and they didn't. Because disciples of Jesus don't. When God is speaking, we call off the attack robots.

Disciples would walk 500 miles instead.

The Proclaimers show us something about discipleship.

"I'm Gonna' Be" was their 1988 hit with a chorus you may have heard:

But I would walk five hundred miles
And I would walk five hundred more
Just to be the man who walked a thousand
Miles to fall down at your door

Love means walking 1000 miles just to impress your beloved with your devotion. That's just romantic bravado. But in verse two, love means working hard for your family, bringing home a paycheck, coming home consistently, and growing old together. It's a long obedience in the same direction. Walking 500 miles is a great picture of what we do as disciples!

The Thessalonians figuratively walked 500 miles in Paul's words.

Paul gave us the key back in **1 Thessalonians 2:13**:

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Did you see it? Paul shared the Gospel with them. They could have activated their defenses and cast his words aside as a lunatic's fantasy. But they didn't. They received Paul's words as the Word of God. They took it in. It changed their lives, and now it is the blueprint for their character and behavior. They're walking 500 miles.

To walk 500 miles is to "embrace" God's Love and Word.

In verse 13, Paul said that the Thessalonians "received" his words. Then he adds that they "**accepted**" it as the Word of God. This is another one of those powerful words Paul uses to describe what it means to be and make disciples. The word comes from the root verb "**dechomai**" which means to welcome something—a person, a thing, or an idea—into your life. You take it in. It becomes part of you. You "**embrace**" it. Disciples of Jesus embrace God's Love and Word.

Embracing God's Love and Word has led me to stop trying to control everything in my life.

I naturally try to control too many things around me. The future always seems palpably real to me. I have a natural sense that a cause is going to lead to an effect. Sometimes that's helpful—like when I am motivated to exercise because I can see that it will make me feel good in the future. But sometimes that's unhelpful. Because sometimes it leads me to try to control circumstances and people around me. That can be hurtful and destructive. And on some level, it's all because I don't trust God to be God! I think that I have to do what God isn't. Over time, embracing God's Love and Word has shown me again and again how trustworthy God is. It's His Kingdom, and He is building it. I don't have to. So, I'm walking 500 miles in learning to stop trying to control everything in my life and to trust God with tomorrow. It's terribly liberating for me. And the people I love most love it when I stop trying to control everything in my life.

Still, WHY would you call off the attack robots?

Because you were made for something more! And why would you walk 500 miles? Because what's waiting for you on that journey is indescribably good.

God can be WITH you and IN you.

Jesus is God come to be WITH us.

When God created the world, the Bible tells us that He walked in the Garden of Eden with us daily. We got to be WITH God. When we sinned and disobeyed Him, we were rebelling against Him. We were separated from Him by our own sin, but we got the idea that God was AGAINST us. But He wasn't. So, God the Father sent God the Son into the world. Jesus took on flesh and became one of us. He was WITH us. And He showed us that God always has been with us and is with us and for us now. When He died on the cross, He paid the price for our sin and made it possible for us to be reconciled to God. We can be WITH Him! But that's not the end of the Good News.

In Christ, the Holy Spirit is God come to be IN us.

When we accept Jesus and His offer of forgiveness and reconciliation, God's Love embraces us, and we embrace God's Love. Then God puts His Holy Spirit into us. We are made new. We are made ready to live now for Him and with Him forever. God is helping us to embrace His Word. When we embrace God's Love and Word, our past is forgiven, our present and future change, and even our motivations are shaped by God.

Embracing God's Love and Word is like the Japanese art of yobitsugi.

In yobitsugi, an artist takes a broken vessel—a cup, plate, or bowl—and mends the fragments together with lacquer. The resin highlights the cracks. But the yobitsugi artist also adds other fragments—pieces of something even more valuable. What a beautiful image of embracing God's Love and Word. We, too, are broken vessels, and by embracing something even more valuable—God's Love and Word—we are transformed into works of art displaying God's glory.¹ That's what happened to the Thessalonians. That's what can happen to us.

Embracing God's Love and Word changes us fundamentally and forever.

Our narrative changes; God's Story is now our story, and we are written into the plotline. Our motivations change; we live out of God's strength and for God's purposes. Our behaviors change; obeying Him becomes more natural with time. All of which has real world consequences. It means uncomfortable things, like making choices about intimacy that honor God even if they are out step with our culture. It means inconvenient things, like being generous with our time, talents, and treasures even though everything inside of us wants to keep those things to ourselves. It means speaking up and sharing the Gospel, even when we don't think we're adequately prepared. It means letting other Christians into our lives and being part of their lives, too.

When we embrace God's Love and Word, we don't lose—we win.

Marvin Olasky embraced Christ and tore up his Communist Party membership card.

Olasky grew up in a Jewish home. In 1971, he graduated from Yale and began a career as a reporter with a head full of arrogance. In 1972, he became a card-carrying Communist, a decision that led him to the Soviet Union. When he came back to the United States, he went to work at a university, intent on indoctrinating students into Marxism. But then, in 1973, he asked the simple, life-changing question,

¹ <https://districtchurch.org/church-unity-in-yobitsugi/>

“What if Lenin is wrong?” Specifically, he worried that there might be a god. Then he began to pursue God and found Him! He studied Jesus’ teachings and was struck by how much more loving they were than Marxism. He tore up his Communist Party membership card. He studied Puritan sermons and discovered that he was indeed a sinner. Eventually, he and his wife began attending church, where they finally came to saving faith in Jesus. All of which led to a life-long career in Christian leadership, politics, and journalism. Embracing Jesus changed every detail of Olasky’s life.²

Do we dare embrace God’s Love and Word that way today?

What crisis would happen if we were to go on that mission trip we’ve been thinking about for years? How would the foundations of the world shake if we were to join a group and give community a chance? What existential threat would be unleashed if we were to ask someone gently what God is doing in their lives? Would the sun go dark if we gave generously? If we chose to serve? Would living according to God’s plan for human intimacy really cause the stars to fall from the sky? Our Fortresses of Solitude stand ready to protect us from the Kingdom of God breaking into our lives, from the Light of God shining in the dark, and from us embracing (really embracing) God’s Love and Word.

Embracing God tears down our fortresses.

At the end of the day, an embrace is like a hug. We draw something close, into our personal space. The attack robots don’t work there. The security cameras, the giant locked door, and the continent-sized separations have all failed. We are exposed. Vulnerable. We are letting something past our defenses and into our hearts. We are taking that thing into ourselves. Like we’re gobbling it down. Or like we’re taking a shot. It’s getting into our system, circulating in our blood. When we embrace God, the fortress has fallen! Which is probably the best news we could get. Our Fortress of Solitude is breached. God is inside. The Life of Heaven is loose and wreaking havoc with our once comfortable lives.

Embracing God makes our half-heartedness whole.

Doing things half-heartedly is just as much an enemy of authentic discipleship as is not doing them at all. That’s what Paul feared might have set in among the Thessalonians. It means that the attack robots are not far behind and that the Fortress of Solitude is rising up around us. But Paul told the Thessalonians that being a disciple means embracing God’s Love and Word. He’s telling us the same thing. There is nothing half-hearted about that. It’s whole-hearted, all-the-way discipleship; whole-hearted, all-the-way living. And that is truly living. Isn’t that what you truly want?

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2026/01/marvin-olasky-testimony-communism-to-christ/>