

Living with affliction \* 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:11

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One of the things that's really struck me in reading 1 Thessalonians is how much it cost the Thessalonian Christians to be Christians.

I mean, think about it – a couple months into their faith and they've already been hauled up in front of the civic authorities, they've been forced to pay money as a promise of good behaviour and their leaders and teachers have been run out of town.

Their decision to follow Jesus was a costly one.

And it's made me wonder – what would happen if that happened here? We've had graffiti spray-painted on the wall outside – but not much more than that. What would happen if we faced real persecution like the Thessalonian Christians did? Would we still be here? What would we do if we were persecuted for our faith here at Langford?

Our passage of Scripture for today helps us to think through that question so I'd like you to join me in 1 Thessalonians 2:17 and we're going to read across the chapter marker into chapter 3. So 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10.

Now to really get what's going on here, I think that it's important for us to think about how the church in Thessalonica came into being. Acts 17 tells us about it - Paul and Silas showed up in town, started telling people about this crucified and risen Saviour who reconciled people to God. Over the course of a few months, people believed and put their faith in Jesus and began to walk with Him. Then the religious leaders got jealous and teamed up with the civic leaders to kick Paul and Silas out of town and to put their foot down on this new and growing church.

Imagine what was going on in Paul's mind as he trudged away from Thessalonica. He had just met these new wonderful people. He had seen them turn from idols to serve the living God; he had seen their joy at becoming children of God and now he was forced to leave them all on their own. What do you suppose he's thinking?

Are they going to make it? Are they going to hold firm to their Christian commitment or will they crumble in the face of persecution and fall away?

A lot of you were teachers so you kind of know what Paul's dealing with. You say to your class 'ok class, I need to leave the room for a minute so I want you to work quietly at your desks while I'm gone' and you walk out the door thinking 'what am I going to come back to?' That's what Paul's thinking about the Christians in Thessalonica.

And you can see that – verse 17 –

17 But, brothers and sisters, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.

Every clause in that sentence bears witness to Paul's love for these people. Look how he describes being forced to leave the Thessalonian believers behind: 'we were torn away from you.' That's a pretty good

way of expressing Paul's feeling at this moment but think about this. If a child loses their parents, what are they called? An orphan. If parents lose their child, what are they called? We don't have a word for that in English but in Greek, they used 'orphan' for both situations.<sup>i</sup> And Paul uses that word here – we were torn away from you as a parent loses a child. It's a vivid picture isn't it?

And then he says 'we've been torn away from you in person, but not in thought.' Again, the Greek is really vivid – it's 'we may not see your faces but you are always in our hearts.'

And then 'out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you.' Paul didn't cross the threshold of Thessalonica and say 'oh well, better luck next time;' every step that Paul takes away from Thessalonica makes his desire to return even greater.

And I think it's important to Paul that the Thessalonian believers know that. They're stuck back in Thessalonica with people saying to them 'We understand, you got hoodwinked by a religious charlatan who just wanted your money; he bailed the minute things got tough' (even though it was the Thessalonian church who sent them on their way for their own safety). This is probably the line that some people were feeding them to get them to turn from Jesus. Paul wants the believers know that he is still committed to them and that it is his most fervent desire to get back to them. Verse 18 -

18 For we wanted to come to you--certainly I, Paul, did, again and again--but Satan stopped us.

Paul tells the Thessalonians that he made every effort to get back to them but somehow he was thwarted at every turn. We don't know exactly what that looked like but we do know who was responsible. Paul understood that there are spiritual forces at work beyond what we can see (Ephesians 6:12) and he acknowledges that Satan himself stepped in to keep Paul away from Thessalonica. Again, Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that – the only thing that could stop him from returning to them was the prince of darkness himself.

*Because Paul wanted to get back them. Look at verse 19 -*

19 For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

You know that Ben's been playing the cajon here at church. A week or two ago I went in to the school for their weekly chapel because Ben was going to be playing there. We work together on stuff for the church and make up beats and practice together but I don't know exactly what he's doing at school. The youth worship team got up to play and Ben was just amazing. Right on the beat, creative playing, so good and my heart swelled. You know that feeling of pride in your kids right?

I think that's what Paul is getting at here. The Thessalonian church is a point of pride for Paul - not the selfish kind of pride, but the 'rejoicing in seeing someone you care about thriving' kind of pride. 'You are my glory, you are my crown.' He absolutely delights in them and will delight in them for eternity and so he wants, desperately, to see them now.<sup>ii</sup>

So here's the situation - as chapter 2 closes, we've got Paul sitting some 350kms away from Thessalonica, wondering how the church is doing, desperately hoping that they haven't given up and given in. He has no cell phone, no internet, no text messages to see how they are; his brand new

beloved brothers and sisters are alone in a town that kicked him out for following Jesus and all he can do is hope and pray.

NIV 1 Thessalonians 3:1 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.

2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith...

'When we could stand it no longer...' You hear the emotion in that phrase right? He is so emotionally invested in the Thessalonians' spiritual well-being that the suspense of not knowing how they are doing is killing him. And so when it got to be too much, he sent Timothy in his place.

Why didn't Paul himself go? Well, on a spiritual level, Satan seemed to be stopping him. But even if he could stop Paul, Paul could still send Timothy and HE could get out to Thessalonica. (Score one for the good guys). On a human level, it's probably the fact that there are WANTED posters all over town with Paul's face on them. If he shows up in Thessalonica, it's going to create a whole new set of problems for the Thessalonian church and so he sends a trusted friend and fellow worker in the Gospel to the church.

Again, verse 2, Paul sent Timothy from Athens to Thessalonica, a trip of about ten days on foot to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonians in their faith, verse 3 -

3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.

Again, Paul uses vivid language here. You know when a dog gets really excited and it starts swinging his tail back and forth - Paul says 'I don't want that to happen to you because of these trials;' 'I don't want you to be shaken and agitated by these trials... because...

You know quite well that we were destined for them.

4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. [And we were right]. And it turned out that way, as you well know.

This passage has been very convicting for me. I mean, on one hand, I want you to realize the fullness of life with Jesus, the goodness of life with Jesus and I want you to see how attractive and good Jesus is. And yet there's a part of me that wants to play this down, to minimize the possibility of persecution, which is crazy because within the first two months of introducing the Gospel to the people of Thessalonica, Paul was already telling them 'if you follow Jesus, you will be persecuted.' Verse 4 again - 'we kept telling you, again and again, that we would be persecuted.'

It's like the possibility of persecution is a dirty little secret in the contemporary church. Nobody wants to talk about it and then we're surprised when it happens. Paul says quite plainly, 'if you're going to follow Jesus, then everyone who opposes Him will oppose you too.' Satan doesn't want believers to thrive and so he'll work through other people to undermine them.

And Paul had already seen that in Thessalonica. The people who refused to trust in Jesus had lashed out at His followers and so Paul was afraid that these new followers might have just given up.

5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.

If Satan could stop Paul from getting to Thessalonica, Paul knew all too well that he could stop the brand new Thessalonian believers from holding on to Jesus and if that happened, all of Paul's time and investment in the Thessalonian church would have been in vain.

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.<sup>iii</sup>

What a beautiful verse, right? It reminds me of that moment in *Apollo 13* when they shuttle goes behind the moon and they lose radio contact and the people on the ground aren't sure if they'll be able to reconnect after. It's all tense, they're sitting waiting, waiting, longer and longer, longer than it should take? Are they lost forever? And then the radio crackles – they're alive.

That's this! Paul's been sitting on pins and needles for weeks, waiting, desperately to hear how his new charges in the faith are doing. Do they still believe? Do they still trust in Jesus? Do they still trust Paul? Are they still glad to have had Paul's teaching or do they wish they'd never met him?

Timothy brings the news that they have stood firm. There is still a church in Thessalonica. Jason and Ricky and Secundus, they all still believe. They all still love Jesus.

And not only that, they still love Paul! They remember their time with him fondly and hope that they will have a chance to see him again.

Can you imagine what an encouragement that would be to Paul – to hear that not only are these people still walking with Jesus, they still value and miss Paul as a teacher? It is a real blessing to Paul. And you can see that in verse 7 -

7 Therefore, brothers and sister, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

Paul's heart rises and falls with his church's faith and the Thessalonians' faith has put him through the roof.

9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Paul is utterly delighted to know that his people are thriving and he prays that God would make a way for him to get back to see them. After months of waiting, Paul can finally rest knowing his people are standing firm in the faith.

So, that's our Scripture passage today. Let's change gears for a minute and think about what it means for us. I want to highlight for you three things:

1. The inevitability of persecution.

2. The importance of perseverance. And
3. The investment of pastors.

As we apply this passage in our own lives, I think that we need to think about these three things. Let's unpack them one at a time.

1. The inevitability of persecution.

I don't think that Paul could be any clearer about this. 3:3, Paul says to the Thessalonian church: 'you know quite well that we were destined for persecution.' Verse 4, he says 'when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted' and when it happened we said 'we told you so!'

You know, if I was going to come up with a curriculum for new believers, it would probably lean pretty heavy on the Apostles' Creed – I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of Heaven... This passage makes me realize that I should probably be including this reality that as followers of Jesus, we will inevitably face persecution of one kind or another.

I think that part of the reason that that's not immediately obvious is that for the last fifteen hundred years or so, the church has been in a position of power – we've been living in 'Christendom' and so we've been setting the agenda for society. Nobody's persecuted us!

But now that relativism and humanism and atheism have risen to the fore, we're living in the kingdom of the world and we find ourselves in the same place as the first generations of Christians, on the margins and vulnerable to persecution. It's bound to happen.

And Jesus Himself tells us why. John 15:18-19: 18 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you (Joh 15:18-19 NIV).

Persecution for Christians is inevitable because our very existence implies that the world is not all there is; that this world and its values and priorities are not the highest authorities. When Jesus saves us, He delivers us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of light and so it should come as no surprise when the darkness attempts to extinguish the light.<sup>iv</sup> We no longer belong to the darkness and so it tries to put it out. Paul's experience with this passage shows us that "...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12 NIV).

We have the privilege of living in a culture where we are not overtly persecuted; even so, we need to recognize the possibility that following Jesus may indeed result in persecution. We need to take that possibility seriously and honestly ask ourselves 'if I was persecuted like the Thessalonians were, would I still be here? Do I trust Jesus enough that I would still be here, even if it cost me more than gas on a Sunday morning?'

This passage teaches us that the persecution of Christians is inevitable, which makes perseverance, standing firm in the faith, all the more important. That's our second point – the importance of perseverance.

When I sit down to prepare a message like this, I always ask three questions of the passage. What is it talking about? What is it saying about what it's talking about? And why was it written? What did the author want to accomplish by writing this particular passage of Scripture?

The purpose in this passage has neon lights flashing around it. 'We want to strengthen and encourage you in your faith' (3:2). 'We don't want anyone to be unsettled by these trials' (3:3). 'Now we really live because you are standing firm in the Lord' (3:8). Why did Paul write this? To encourage believers to keep standing firm in the Lord. To encourage us to persevere in our walk with Jesus. Paul knew that we could face persecution as believers and so he knew that we would need encouragement to keep on standing firm.

Now Paul doesn't outright say why in this passage; he doesn't systematically explain why it's important to stand firm in the face of persecution. But I think that he has already told us in this letter why it is important to persevere in our faith. Chapter 1, verse 10: there is a coming wrath, when Jesus returns to set all things right. When Jesus triumphs over all that is wrong in the world and re-establishes the good and perfect kingdom that God created in the first place, He alone can deliver us from wrath into the eternity. That's one reason to persevere in our faith – our faith in Jesus is the only thing that delivers us from that coming wrath.

But there's another reason that Paul has told us – a much more personal one – verse 4 – 'we know brothers and sisters loved by God, that He has chosen you...'

God does not want to lose any of His precious children. He gave His one and only Son to deliver us from sin and to walk with us in every moment of life. His love for us is so great that we'd be crazy to trust ourselves to anything else. We stand firm because our God is standing with us. He delights in us, He treasures us; it's important to persevere because God Himself love us.

So why is it important to persevere? Because when we stand firm in the faith, we are delivered from the coming wrath into the Kingdom of our loving Father.

So, there's the inevitability of persecution, the importance of perseverance and the investment made by pastors.

Here's what I mean by that. At times, Paul can come across as pretty dense – he's a law guy and an intellectual giant – so he can be quite systematic and detailed at times. But here, maybe more than any other letter, Paul's heart as a pastor comes through. I love this letter because you just feel Paul's commitment to his people, to seeing them grow and thrive as believers.

'You are our hope and our joy and our crown' (19). 'When I could stand it no longer, I just had to see how you were' (1, 5). 'In all our distress we are encouraged by your faith; we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord' (7-8).

I'm sure that John Bunner feels that way about you. I'm sure that George Closs feels that way about you. A hundred percent, I feel that way about you.

Good pastors invest their lives in the well-being of their flock and it is our greatest joy to see people thriving in faith. I want you to know how invested I am in seeing your faith grow and expand, in seeing you use your God-given gifts to make an impact on the world by the Holy Spirit that goes well beyond

what you in your own strength could accomplish. This is not a job for me – it is a calling – to nurture you and your faith with all the love and care that God Himself loves and cares for you with. Even if nobody else in the world cares about your spiritual well-being, I do, and I want to see you healthy and growing and standing firm in the face of trials. My heart rises and falls with your faith. You are my joy and my crown.

The inevitability of persecution; the importance of perseverance and the investment made by pastors.

Bring that together and I'll leave you with this: Stand firm in the faith, knowing that I am cheering you on. Stand firm in the faith, knowing that I am cheering you on.

Paul is pretty clear: persecution is inevitable. If we have the privilege of living without persecution, praise God for that! But if it does come, stand firm. Keep the faith. Don't give up and give in but knowing that the God of wrath-and-grace loves you and will deliver you. And know that I am cheering you on. I will be right there with you, praying for you, giving thanks for you, doing my best to build you up and to encourage you in your faith.

Stand firm in the faith, knowing that I am cheering you on.

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<sup>i</sup> Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Pillar), 150.

<sup>ii</sup> See also Hebrews 13:17: 'Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.'

<sup>iii</sup> Let's just trace the mail route for a minute here. Paul sent Timothy from Athens to Thessalonica to check in on the Thessalonians and to build up their faith. He returned to Paul at Corinth to fill him in on all the details and then Paul wrote this letter and sent it back to Thessalonica with Timothy carrying it.

<sup>iv</sup> Colossians 1:13, 1 Peter 2:9, Ephesians 5:8-11.