

Suffering for the Kingdom - 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 19th of November 2000.

The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled Suffering for the Kingdom and is from 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 1 to 12.

Amen. How much are we as a church, God's church, prepared to suffer for God's purposes?

Is it right that the true people of God should suffer persecution and hardship in the world? Indeed, if that does happen, where is the justice of God in this world if his followers suffer at the hands of those who would seek to make a mockery of God and the ways that he has commanded us to live, as we see written down for us in scripture?

These types of questions are the sorts of questions that I hear asked from time to time by people that are inquiring about the Christian faith, as well as people who have been Christians for quite some time.

[1 : 5 0] But let me tell you, if you are one of those people who ask those types of questions, then let me assure you that you are not alone. In fact, these are the sorts of questions that people have been asking for thousands and thousands of years.

Now as we turn to Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, we see here how he encourages this young church, a group of young Christians who have been enduring all sorts of persecution to continue on in their faith and obedience and trust of the Lord God.

And Paul has planted this church in Thessalonica in one of his missionary journeys, along with his companions, Silvanus and Timothy. And they were well known to the church in Thessalonica, and for this reason, Paul names them as he begins this letter.

He writes in verses 1 and 2, Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is who the Thessalonian Christians worship. They worship God. God our Father.

[3 : 1 4] His personal relationship that they have with him. It's God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And there can be no mistake of what it is that these people have in common with the Apostle Paul and with other Christians for that matter.

That is the worship of God. Their worship of God, who is the creator of everything. And in addition to that, the worship of his Son, Jesus Christ.

And it's because of God and the work that he has done through his Son, Jesus Christ, in his death and on the cross and subsequent resurrection, that Paul then adds the words grace and peace.

Grace and peace. God's grace is his unmerited favor shown to us in Jesus, resulting in peace between people and God.

And that is the greatest gift that anyone could have because it means when we have a knowledge of peace with God, it means an eternity in God's presence.

[4 : 17] And God's peace is extended to all who believe and trust in Jesus as the way to God. Well, God's grace and peace through the Lord Jesus Christ is there for the Christians in Thessalonica.

In fact, God's grace and peace is extended to anyone who trusts in him. But there doesn't seem to be much peace here for these Christians in Thessalonica as we read about it in verses 3 and 4.

And when we look at those verses, we see here a good church that is going through a fairly rough time, it seems. So this is a good church.

This church in Thessalonica is doing a good thing. And there are lots of good things happening in it for which Paul gives thanks to God. In fact, Paul is compelled to give thanks to God for them because it is right to do so as we read on.

Now, the reasons he gives thanks to God for these Thessalonian Christians are twofold. The first one is seen in verse 3 of this passage. He gives thanks to God for these Thessalonian Christians because in verse 3 he says, Your faith is growing abundantly.

[5 : 32] Now, Paul had written a previous letter. This is why this letter is called Two Thessalonians, the first letter. And in the first letter he wrote, First Thessalonians, he expressed a desire to help in making up what was lacking in their faith.

And since that letter, whether it was written some weeks before or some months before this current letter that he's writing, it's obvious that these Thessalonian Christians have had some spiritual growth.

And Paul is thankful to God and he attributes this grace to God's saving grace, or God's grace. So Paul gives thanks to God because their faith is growing abundantly.

Secondly, he gives thanks to God because the love of every one of you for one another is increasing as we read on. Now, in his letter, in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, his prayer was that the Lord would make them increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

Now, this ought to be a prayer for all churches, especially where there are different social and cultural backgrounds to contend with. Now, this Thessalonian church would have had these issues to deal with as well.

[6 : 47] They would have had people in the church who were perhaps from a Jewish background and therefore accustomed to the Jewish laws and practices. It also would have had in that church non-Jewish people, what we call Gentiles.

And in a sense, the Jews and the Gentiles were hostile to one another. Yet we see here in this Thessalonian church, this group of Christians, their cultural differences are put aside so that they can worship God and his son, Jesus Christ.

It just goes to show that the power of the gospel of Jesus, in its true expression, is such that it unites people, cutting across cultures, to bring people together.

And that's a message that we would do well to hear in our world today, where we see so much hatred going on with people trying to put their own causes together and so on.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, in its true expression, will bring cultures together and unite people. Now, it seems that Paul's prayer here in this first letter has been answered.

[8 : 02] And for that he gives thanks to God for that answer to prayer, for their increasing love for one another. Well, things are going pretty well in this church.

And as I said, Paul is thankful to God for that. But look at how their spiritual growth in the Lord is coming about and how their love for one another is increasing.

It's not because they have an easy lifestyle or anything like that. It seems that their spiritual growth and love for one another has increased while they have been enduring, as we're told in verse 4, some form of persecution and affliction at the same time.

Remember, this is a good church going through a rough time. And so impressed with their steadfastness is Paul that he talked about it approvingly to the other churches.

As they're doing a good thing in their afflictions, they're growing and increasing in love and so on. Paul talks about it to the other churches. And Paul actually boasts about it, we're told in verse 4.

[9 : 11] But the boast that he has is not a personal boast. It's not a boast which says, look everybody at this great church that I have planted. It's doing a wonderful thing. I'm really good and I'm really glad that God has put me here.

It's not that sort of a boast at all. It's a boast to the other churches about the proof that God was and is at work in their lives, in these Thessalonian Christian lives, despite their hardships and despite the sufferings that they are enduring at this present time.

Now I think that this is a really important point for us to take notice of because in some circles of the church today, it is actively taught that material wealth and physical well-being are the outward marks of spiritual prosperity.

A recent example of that is the story of Hansi Kronje, who's a Christian, took bribes and so on. Perhaps thought that that was the right thing to do.

The Apostle Paul who wrote this letter would have no kind of sympathy with that kind of thinking. He prized Christians, Paul prized Christians who could hold up when the going got rough because they knew that suffering was not a sign that God had abandoned them, but rather it was proof that they were following in the steps that Jesus trod.

[10 : 33] And Jesus warned his disciples about this as well. In another part of the Bible, in John's Gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, servants are not greater than their master. If they persecuted me, they too will persecute you.

If they kept my word, they will keep yours also. It was expected for Christians that persecution would come. Now Paul's attitude to these Christians in Thessalonica can teach us a great deal.

Let's think about his attitude and think about ourselves. What is it that we appreciate? Those things that make us feel grateful will reveal a great deal about our hearts and about perhaps who we are.

They will tell us where our priorities truly lie. And so often we're thankful for things that make for our own comfort and financial security. But Paul here gives thanks for a group of people.

What is it about people that we value most? If you were to ask parents how their children are coming along, you'll often be told about exam results or career prospects and how that's the goal they have for their children.

[11 : 52] Paul here is grateful for people who were making spiritual progress in the Lord, in love and faith and obedience of serving the Lord God.

So Paul gives thanks to God for this church that is going through a rough time. Now in the next section of this passage, verses 5 to 10, we learn about a good God who is waiting for the right time.

Now it seems that when Christian people and non-Christian people suffer, they are often tempted to call the justice of God into question. However, this church in Thessalonica is prepared to suffer hardship and persecutions because they have a right view of who God is.

They understand who he is. They know God's supreme nature. And Paul, in addressing the issue of their sufferings, is concerned to help them keep their spiritual balance in the face of such temptations.

So if you look at verse 5, he makes the point that their very patience is itself evidence of the righteous judgment of God. The thing that kept them going was the knowledge and conviction that God's cause was right and that in his time it will be shown to be so.

- [13 : 14] Yet while they wait for that time to arrive, while they wait for God's justice and judgment to arrive, there will be sufferings and hardships to endure along the way. And these Thessalonian Christians are testimonies of that.

As I said a moment ago, the Bible teaches that living the Christian life is never going to be easy. Again, just look at the way Jesus himself went.

He went the way of the cross. He suffered death at the hands of human beings. His death achieved a great victory for those who believe in him, but he still suffered a cruel death.

Jesus expects his followers to do the same. Perhaps not necessarily to go to the cross, but he does expect that Christians will suffer hardships and persecutions as they travel through life.

And we should realise and remind ourselves, just as these Thessalonian Christians realised, that authentic suffering for the sake of the gospel, as we read in this passage, makes you worthy of the kingdom of God.

- [14 : 27] Now Paul isn't supposing that somehow they became worthy enough to be accepted by God. The idea, rather, is that having become Christians, they are outwardly expressing Christian faith and love.

And these Thessalonians are living examples, if you like, of grace under fire. And their perseverance, their endurance, will make them worthy of the kingdom of God.

So to genuine Christians, by God's grace, persevere in the gospel. And this marks out their fitness for God's kingdom.

Now there is coming a day where there will be payback time for those who have cruelly opposed God's people. Look at verses 6 to 8, for example.

Let me read it to you. For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- [15 : 42] There can be no doubt from these words that God is just. But God's timing of justice is different from our timing.

Although I am sure that there are snippets of God's justice displayed in this broken and divided world in which we live. But let's face it. Let's really face up to the fact.

In this world, many evil people seem to get away with a lot, don't they? And in this world, many people of extraordinary goodness seem to suffer lots.

With this in mind, a wise parent would do well to tell their children, life isn't fair and don't expect it to be. Yet at the same time, saying and teaching their children that God is fair and that he is perfectly just.

But don't expect his justice to be shown in instantaneous rewards and retribution because God's time scale is not ours. Life isn't fair in our time scale.

- [16 : 55] And I can think of many instances in my own life where I feel that. Where I feel that life just doesn't seem to be fair. I'm sure you can think of some as well.

When Jesus returns, however, not only will justice be done, not only will God's justice be done, it will be seen to be done. And in the meantime, we as Christians, those who are followers of the gospel of God, of Jesus Christ, those who are God's people, are called to persevere until he comes.

And that does mean that there will be suffering and hardship along the way. Well, what will happen on that day when Jesus returns? Verses 7 and 8 seem to give us an image of how Jesus will return.

And whether it happens that way or not, we'll have to wait and see. But however it occurs, the primary thing that we'll see on that day is God's justice being done and being seen to be done.

And for those who don't know God or obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are told in verse 9 that they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction. And this verse goes on to explain that this means that they will be separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might for an eternity.

[18 : 17] It's not just a period of time, but it's an eternity. It will be ongoing. Now I have to be honest with you and say that people don't like to hear this sort of stuff about God's judgment and eternal destruction because they think it seems so unfair.

Well, unfair or not, this is how God's word, the Bible, talks about Christ's return and the coming judgment upon those who do not know him.

And friends, the Apostle Paul is not the only one to talk about it. Throughout the Bible, in the Old Testament, it is full of warnings about God's judgment.

Jesus himself warns about God's judgment and so do the other New Testament writers. But if you choose to ignore God because you think he's unfair, then I would want to suggest that you will be standing on the wrong side of God's judgment facing eternal destruction and separation from God when he does finally return.

It all sounds pretty glum, doesn't it? But there is good news in this. The flip side of this warning is seen in verse 10. And that is, when Christ returns, that same Lord Jesus will be glorified and marvelled at among those who have believed.

[19 : 47] Those who are trusting God, those who trust in Jesus Christ, will be in glory for eternity, worshipping and with God forever.

Now, if you don't know what you believe about God and his son Jesus, then I ask, I urge you to ask questions. Look at the Bible for yourselves. See what it has to say about Jesus, about what he is going to do when he finally returns.

And if you're still unsure about that, pray to God, asking him to help you believe in the areas in your own life that you are struggling with in believing. But don't ignore him.

Don't put it off. The consequences, as we read in this passage, are far too high for those who choose to ignore him. Well, Paul goes on and he ends this section reassuring the Thessalonians of his and his companions' prayers for them.

Essentially, we see here a good man praying in the meantime for these Thessalonian Christians. In verses 11 and 12, he says, To this end, we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 23] Although the future of God's people is secure, Paul, the apostle, does not presume upon it. His prayer is, in essence, here, a prayer that these faithful Thessalonians will continue on in faithfulness and holiness all the days of their lives or until Christ returns and then it will naturally go on in faith and obedience when he returns.

Now, it's not Paul's prayer that will bring them into God's kingdom, mind you. It's only by God's grace that we enter into God's kingdom. But his prayer is that these Thessalonian Christians will be sustained along the way and that through their lives Jesus will indeed be glorified.

That means, I guess, spoken of, testified to and they endure because of what he has done for them. Now, isn't that the goal for all Christians?

That is, that Jesus is glorified in our lives to the people who surround us whether or not we are going through good times or bad times.

Isn't that one of the goals that we as Christians ought to have? And what an encouragement that must be to those who are the original hearers of this letter to hear that Paul and his companions are praying for them.

[22 : 47] To know that they're being prayed for in their situation and that through whatever their circumstances may be they will bring honour and glory to God. Well, as Christians we ought to be able to tell our brothers and sisters that we too are praying for them.

Now, it's fine to pray for health issues for those who are sick and those who have to make decisions about work and all those sorts of things. But we also should be praying along the lines that Paul is praying here.

Praying that God will make us worthy of his call and that he will fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith so that Jesus may be glorified and so on.

So next time you pray for your friends, let me encourage you to pray as Paul has prayed here in these verses at the end of this chapter. and next time someone asks you what he or she can pray for perhaps here is a suggestion that you can give them to pray along these lines to pray that the Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified in your lives.

Let me pray as we finish. Our Father we thank you for your word we thank you that it is true and Lord we pray that you would help us to understand the truth of it.

[24 : 18] Lord we pray that we would understand that as Christians throughout the world and even here in Australia Christians will suffer hardship and sufferings and persecutions.

Lord I pray that we would endure and abound and increase in our faith and love of you as a result. Lord I pray that we as a church here will encourage one another and encourage one another by our prayers praying that we will indeed be living examples of you and seeking to glorify you in all of our lives.

And Lord we do this because of what you have done for us and because of the hope that we have of eternal life for those who trust in you. Amen.

Amen.