

Thessalonians, Pt 6: The Promise of Persecution

1 Thessalonians 3:1 ESV (Pg. 574) Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, **2** and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, **3** that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. **4** For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. **5** For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

- I. When we are born, by default (and without exception) we're pursuing comfort. As soon as a child emerges, it cries from the loss of the comfort it once knew. Light, cold, sound and kinetic activity have disrupted the sense of peace and safety the baby once knew in the darkness, warmth, quiet, and stillness of the womb.
 - A. As the child grows, it continues to grasp for every elusive comfort. It will cry when it is hungry, frightened, wet or dirty. It will cry when it becomes angry at a perceived injustice. It will cry when it is injured physically or emotionally. When it wants something that is being withheld for any reason, again, it will cry out.
 - B. Prodded by this pursuit of ultimate comfort, very early in life the child sets itself up as the absolute king and sovereign of all it surveys; with no thought given to the sacrifices that such a lofty role requires of everyone around them.
 1. Mom is tired and needs to sleep? Tough! The hunger of the little one must be attended to on the double. Brother or sister has the toy they want? It must be surrendered immediately, as soon as they shriek, "MINE!"
 2. This desire to be catered to is innocently reinforced by the parent's response to the helplessness of the child at the beginning, but it isn't helped by the fact that the child has inherited the sinful, selfish heart of their parents.
 - a) The child that cries for comfort from fears, and the nourishment of food, is the same child who will cry in protest whenever a parent says "no".
 - b) A will that is centered on ourselves is the universal condition of every person. An exception can't be found, no matter where you look.
 - C. As we grow, nothing much changes. It may look like introspection as we obsess about what **we** mean; what **our** purpose in life is, how **we** can make an impact in this great big world, and give **our** lives some sense of grand meaning; but this is similar to the demands of the baby in the crib: the focus is **me**, and only **me**.
 1. So we spend our adult lives crafting identities and reputations to feel like we **are** somebody (I think social media was invented for this!). We pursue bigger, better material things to achieve a sense of meaning; an external reminder to ourselves and everyone else that we have "made it".
 2. And we don't particularly care for the changing "seasons" of life. We prefer the emotional, physical, and financial thermostat to be set at a constant 72°.
 - a) To avoid any disruption of the established order, we compromise and negotiate; bending some rules, and breaking others; always tending to excuse ourselves, even when we make up entirely new rules so we can insure our preferred self-centered and self-satisfying outcomes.

- b) Our position as Kings and Queens, seated upon our velvet pillows, may demand that we lie, cheat, or sacrifice our ethics and morals. We will often inconvenience or injure others to achieve our end; but so what?
 - 3. But we soon discover that it's a problem living in a world where everyone else is **also** looking out only for their own interests. So we push, shove, and demand our way, while others do the same thing; and all the time, all of us are cursing each other's selfishness and inconsideration, but rarely our own.
 - D. Sadly, the church has often not done much to curb these narcissistic impulses. Think about it. We invite people to make Christ "their **personal** Lord and Savior", promising them "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for **your life**". That concept appeals to us because it focuses on my favorite person: **me**. Tom Hall likes to say, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your plan."
 - 1. Even one of the best-selling authors in the Christian market today is known for his wildly popular titles like: "Become a Better You", "Your Best Life Now", "Think Better, Live Better" and "It's Your Time"¹.
 - 2. His TV and radio broadcasts are an unending feast of affirmation; reminding you how great and inherently good you are². These sort of things make you feel warm and fuzzy on the inside, but they are unbiblical, and are no better than the mumbo-jumbo motivational gurus like Tony Robbins are selling.
- II. But then along comes the Biblical gospel. As soon as we open the Bible, we find a very different view of who we are. It is pointed out that we are all sinners (rebels against God), living in a world that is also fallen; a world driven by the idol of self, filled with destruction, war, famine and disease and crime. It is a world where the powerful rule, and the weakest get stepped on. The principle value of this fallen world system surrounding us can be stated simply as "might makes right".
 - A. But the gospel says to be rescued from this cycle of madness we must put all of our hope, not in ourselves, but in Jesus; who is so perfect that we no longer have to try to be, or pretend to be. He is someone who has paid the enormous debt of all of our wrongdoing, so that we can not only have a clean slate, but we can have a slate that can never again be corrupted, since it is no longer about us and our works, but about Jesus and his perfect works.
 - 1. Believing the gospel, we are saved. But we find that though we are saved from the world's corruption and self-centered decay, we aren't removed from living in the world. We are surrounded by people who still have the same selfish heart we are being delivered from.
 - 2. But this shouldn't shock us. We are right where we belong. Jesus actually prayed for us, that we would be left in the world, as it is, while we live:
 - a) **John 17:15 ESV I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.**
 - b) We are in the world because Jesus wants us here. We are not called to be monks or nuns hidden away in a monastery or convent, but we are to be an influential presence in the world we occupy for the glory of God.

- B. But because the world is still chasing ease, wealth, and power, the people of God become the “fly in the ointment” to the people of the world as we follow King Jesus. Because we are the ones crying for them to flee the coming wrath³, a state of hostility exists between the followers of Christ and the world.
1. The people of the world and the flesh don’t want to be reminded of the promised doom, or the need to repent and submit to God. **Matthew 7:13 ESV** “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. **14** For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.
 2. The lost world likes things “wide and easy”. They don’t want to be troubled with the idea that the way that leads to life is narrow and hard. In their mind, Christians are an unnecessary, uptight annoyance.
- C. Although Christians must strive to be peaceable and hospitable, there can never be a treaty with the world’s lies that lead to the eternal destruction. Because of this, there will never be a cessation of hostilities between the children of God and those of the world, who are lovers of pleasure, and not God⁴.
1. **Matthew 11:16 ESV** “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, **17** “‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’
 2. When we refuse to sing and dance to the world’s tune, it makes them angry! Our “swimming upstream” is disruptive to their consciences, and robs them of their semblance of peace, and their sense of the way things ought to be.
- III. Paul told the Thessalonians when he was with them, “that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.” He made a promise of suffering a part of his gospel presentation. This was a direct teaching of Jesus to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. **John 15:18 ESV** “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. **19** If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”
- A. In the city of Lystra, the angry Jews stirred up the crowd to pelt Paul’s body with rocks. When they were certain he was dead, they dragged his carcass out of town. But he wasn’t dead! He returned to town and went right back to preaching, and even continued his missionary journey with Barnabas.
 - B. **Acts 14:21 ESV** When they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, **22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith**, and saying that **through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God**. There are 3 things to notice from this text:
 1. First, the Bible says that they strengthened the souls of the disciples. That corresponds to Paul saying in our text that he sent Timothy back to the Thessalonians to “establish” them. This means to “set in place” or “fix”.
 - a) He’s implying they were not yet firmly rooted. The Bible tells us that we are “rooted and grounded” by always adhering to what have been taught

in the Gospel⁵. That means that we grow roots not only by our belief at the beginning, but by continually turning our attention to God's Word.

- b) So Timothy returned to give them further instruction. If you neglect the study of the Bible, and gathering with the Body to have the Bible taught to you, you will not stand when tribulations or persecution come⁶.
 2. Second, the Bible also says they **encouraged** them to continue in the faith. This corresponds to Paul saying that Timothy returned to “**exhort**” the Thessalonians in the faith. Exhort is a loaded word in the Greek⁷. Exhortation is a spiritual gift⁸ that entails doing the things for others that the Holy Spirit does for us: to comfort, to instruct, to strengthen, encourage, or admonish.
 3. Thirdly, Paul says “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”. Though we come to the gate of the kingdom by faith, we are promised that the path that leads us in will be attended with trouble and sorrow.
- C. Trouble has the potential to make people bail on Jesus (no matter where it comes from!). I have spoken to many over the years who are disillusioned because Christianity hasn't turned out like they imagined or they were promised.
1. But that's why Paul sent Timothy to establish and exhort them, “**that no one be moved by these afflictions**”. He knew that tribulation outside of the context of a Christ-centered worldview could be devastating.
 2. The Thessalonians couldn't make it without understanding the Word, or without the encouragement of their loving brothers and sisters in Christ.
- D. Paul reminds their church that “**we are destined for this**” concerning the persecution they faced. It was guaranteed. There is no avoiding it.
1. This is the central truth. If you are truly following Christ, you will not dodge the bullet of tribulation and persecution. Though the line between the two is often hard to discern (tribulation feels like persecution, while persecution is definitely a tribulation!), all will experience a little of both as we follow Jesus.
 - a) Generally tribulation is the devil's direct assault on you, or the loving discipline of the Father, or merely the result of living in a fallen world.
 - b) Persecution is usually the the world's hostile resistance to the gospel.
 2. But you can take great comfort from knowing that as you face trouble and are persecuted, Jesus has experienced the same before you did. You will not experience any affliction that Christ himself did not overcome before you⁹.
- E. **Isaiah 53:3a ESV** He was **despised** and **rejected by men** (persecution), a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (tribulation)... “**Rest assured that in whatever way of suffering we have to go in consequence of our being a child of man, and especially in consequence of being a child of God, we will find that Christ has gone that way ahead of us.**” -Charles Haddon Spurgeon¹⁰
- IV. You might think that this is no way to present Christianity to the world. We should focus on the positives. Maybe all that “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” stuff isn't so bad! It surely beats telling people that if you follow Jesus, you might not survive! Who would want to follow Christ if that is what's promised?
- A. And yet, beginning with all of the Apostles, and repeated countless times in every generation of the church since, many have chosen to suffer and even die, rather than forsake the connection they had with the risen Lord.

1. In the 1500's, English Bible translator, William Tyndale was strangled to death while tied at the stake, and then his dead body was burned. As he was dying he exclaimed, "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes!"¹¹
 2. But martyrdom has not ceased in modern times. In fact, in the last year over 245 million Christians were living in places where there is high levels of persecution¹², including rape, torture, political oppression, imprisonment and execution.
 - a) Last year alone, over 4,000 people were put to death simply because they were followers of Jesus¹³.
 - b) By some estimates 65% of all Christian martyrdom in history happened not in the coliseums of Rome, but throughout the 20th Century¹⁴.
- B. So it would seem that persecution is still the normal expectation of the Christian Life. But many of us would have to admit that we have experienced very little persecution (if any at all) though we claim to be Christ's followers. If that is what is promised to us, why aren't we facing it? There may be a few reasons...
1. Starting with the positive, perhaps we have been shielded by the grace of God. We are never called to go looking for persecution, only to embrace it when it comes, so if we aren't experiencing it, maybe we should rejoice.
 2. However, because Paul says "we are destined for this" and "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God", I don't think we can simply breathe a collective sigh of relief, thinking we've won some cosmic lottery. Lack of persecution may be an indication that something is wrong...
 - a) Perhaps because we are maintaining the pursuit of ease I described at first, we don't look or sound different enough to be a threat. We love the reputation we have, and things the world offers, so we may be fine with religious affiliation, but not the cost of embracing Jesus above all else.
 - b) **James 4:4 ESV** You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Compromise is not acceptable for us. We must be devoted to Christ, far above all else.
- C. It is a matter of what we value. If what the world offers (popularity, wealth, ease) is what you treasure, you will never draw the fire of the world or the devil, and most of us are just fine with that. But in your idolatry, you will someday draw the fire of God for all eternity.
1. In Luke 16, Jesus tells of a rich man who selfishly despises a poor beggar named Lazarus. When they both die, Lazarus is carried by the angels into heaven, while the rich man is cast into hell.
 2. Then the rich man appeals to Abraham to have Lazarus come and comfort him in his torment, Abraham replies: **Luke 16:25b ESV** 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish'.
- D. But if you recognize Jesus as the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field; you'll be willing suffer any loss, or endure any hardship, or even face death in this life just to have him and to please him. You will view it all as a fair and just cost for the simple joy of being able to fellowship with him in his sufferings¹⁵.

1. **1 John 2:15 ESV** Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **16** For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. **17a ESV** And the world is passing away along with its desires...
 2. But the command to not love the world is not just a “thou shalt not” restriction! There is a promise associated with it: **1 John 2:17b ...but whoever does the will of God abides forever.**
- E. Trading all that we value so that we might have Jesus shows that we are wise.
1. We can have what is pleasurable here but will not last, or we can have some trouble here, sustained by the grace of God, only to find lasting treasure here in this life and in the one to come¹⁶.
 2. And when you compare the so-called treasures of this world to the eternal treasure of knowing Jesus to the trinkets this world is offering you, there is no comparison! He is worth whatever he costs us, even our lives!
- V. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. *(The Bloody Way of the Cross)*

¹ I'm speaking of Pastor Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston. In many ways his theology is heretical, denying many clearly-revealed truths of scripture. A list of his self-help (though parading as Christian) books can be found here: <https://www.thriftbooks.com/a/joel-osteen/197474/>.

² See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umpZXIcntk0>. Included in this clip is commentary from Justin Peters who is a qualified apologist exposing the so-called "Prosperity Gospel", of which Joel Osteen is a leading proponent. I say "so-called" because it has nothing to do with the biblical gospel.

³ Luke 3:7

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:1-5

⁵ Colossians 2:6-7

⁶ Mark 4:1-20

⁷ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G3870&t=KJV>

⁸ Romans 12:8

⁹ Hebrews 4:15

¹⁰ Quoted from the notes of the CSB Spurgeon Study Bible; © 2017; Holman Bible Publishers; Nashville, TN; note on Luke 19:28

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Tyndale

¹² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ <https://zenit.org/articles/20th-century-saw-65-of-christian-martyrs-says-author/>

¹⁵ Philippians 3:10

¹⁶ Luke 18:29-30