

Counted Worthy Through Suffering

2 Thessalonians 1.1-5

One of the joys of parenthood is pride when our kids achieve great success. Paul's 'kids' – believers in Christ in Thessalonica, were a source of pride to him: They stood strong despite persecution. And as a result, they would be 'counted worthy of the kingdom of God.'

1. The Christian's Virtues: Faith and Love (3)
2. The Christian's Victory: Rising above Trials (4)
3. The Christian's Vindication: Worthy of the Kingdom (5)

1 Thessalonians 1.1-5

Paul and 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 the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

Someone has distilled the ultimate meaning of life down to this: *If there is no God, nothing matters; if there is a God, nothing else matters.* In other words, if there is a God, nothing is more important than knowing God.

But this leads to a second question: If there is a God, how can we know Him? In a world full of gods and religious writings, how can we know which is right? Without one authoritative revelation from God, there is no absolute truth. Here the Bible stands apart from all other religious writings: It claims to be God's revelation to man, records the beginning of the world, tells how it will end, reveals the problem of sin, and God's plan to save us.

This leads to a third question: If the Bible is God's Word, what does it say about how a person is saved from their sin? The answer is Jesus Christ, God's Son. He came to

earth and died on the cross for our sin, then rose from the dead, victorious over sin and death. He offers the free gift of eternal life to all who believe in Him.

This harmonious message presents a compelling answer to the ultimate questions in life. Every person will answer to God one day, and our eternal destiny will depend on our response: *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved*. But that absolute message explains a reality that is as true today as it was in Thessalonica 2000 years ago. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are persecuted.

Next month we will observe the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church – a reminder that every day in our world Christians are imprisoned, abused, and martyred for their faith. But it isn't just overseas.

Christians are openly persecuted in America today. If you stand for your faith in Christ, you may lose your job. You may be taken to court and lose your business. Politicians who publicly express faith in Jesus Christ are mocked and ridiculed. Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett, a Catholic, has been vilified for her faith. Some Christians shout that this isn't fair! They demand that God step in and punish unbelievers. Some prominent Christians have abandoned faith in God because of all the suffering in the world. If God is good, as author Randy Alcorn entitled one of his books, why doesn't He end all suffering?

The New Testament in general, and 2 Thessalonians in particular, confronts this problem with a startling answer: Suffering in this life is part of the plan of God – in fact, it is an essential 'course' in His training program for those

who believe in Him! And although we don't see it now, it is all going to be worth it in the end.

To set the stage for this counter-intuitive and perplexing biblical truth, we need to head back 2000 years and drop in on first-century Thessalonica, where a group of young Christians were just beginning their journey of faith.

When Paul left on his second missionary journey, his plan was to visit churches planted on his first trip, in the Galatian region. But God had different plans: In a vision he saw a man calling "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" So Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Troas and, sailed to Macedonia, and started preaching the gospel. When they came to Thessalonica, two things happened: They had an enthusiastic response to the gospel, and they encountered severe persecution from Jews. The persecution was so fierce, they were forced to leave after just a few weeks. Paul feared the little band of Christians might wither under the heat of trials, so when they got to Athens, he sent Timothy to check on them.

To Paul's delight, Timothy returned with great news: The Christians in Thessalonica were standing strong for Christ in spite of persecution they were suffering! Paul wrote First Thessalonians, encouraging them in their faith, giving practical instruction for living the Christian life, and informing them about the coming return of Christ.

But a short time later he received troubling news: some of the things he had written them, especially what he had said about the Day of the Lord, were misunderstood or misrepresented. This was affecting the way they lived. So

Paul wrote this letter, Second Thessalonians, to correct any confusion, and encourage them to live godly lives.

The Greeting (1-2)

Paul begins with his characteristic greeting: He tells them he is with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, and expresses a prayerful desire that God would grant them an abundant measure of grace and peace. This was a traditional way of greeting fellow-Christians, but it still is worth noting that of all the things I would bestow on a church today, if I could, an abundance of grace – or *graciousness*, and of peace – instead of chaos and conflict, would top the list.

1. The Christian's Virtues: Faith and Love (3)

Paul opens the body of his letter with thanksgiving: *We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater...*

Paul isn't just dredging up something to say here: He is *under obligation* to give thanks. The word translated 'we ought' (ὀφείλω) means to owe a debt. When he says that it is 'only fitting,' the term (ἄξιος) describes something that corresponds to something else: Paul's thanks to God *corresponds to* what God is doing in their lives. What is he doing? He mentions two virtues:

First, their *faith is greatly enlarged* – they are growing in their faith. What does this mean? It means that they were trusting God more, and trusting themselves less. John the

Baptist captured this succinctly when he said of Jesus, *He must increase, but I must decrease* (Jn. 3.30).

In recent years, a number of prominent Christians have left the faith. I have watched podcasts of them explaining why they no longer believe in God. I have watched other podcasts of Christian leaders who are no longer teaching biblical truth. It is disheartening to watch someone who once confidently proclaimed truth abandoning it. But it is not surprising: Defections from the faith appear in every NT letter. Jesus once asked, *When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?* (Luke 18.8) He knew that many would fall away, and wanted to spur His disciples to grow in their faith.

I have been blessed by having men of strong faith in my life. My father and my father-in-law are two of the most significant, but there are many others. I have doubted my faith at times, and battled with Satan's assaults on God's truth – and those who are strong in the faith have lifted me up. I hope you have people like that in your life. Paul thanks God because the Thessalonians' faith had grown. Second, their *love for each other was growing* – in the face of suffering and persecution, their love was strong. It hadn't always been that way: In 1 Thessalonians he urges them to *increase* in love for each other (3.12; 4.10-12). Why is this so important?

Because Satan uses anything he can to divide the church. We've seen it more dramatically this year than ever in my ministry. Christians have divided over responses to the coronavirus: The elders here, like leaders in churches all over America, have struggled to satisfy those who say

we should never have shut down, and others who say we still shouldn't be open. The rise of Critical Race Theory and the Black Lives Matter movement has split churches, calling each other 'communists' or 'racists.'

The Thessalonians loved each other. Sure, they had their differences, but their love for Jesus Christ united them. In a divisive election year, I submit this should be a model for us. My heart is hurting because Christians who I love and value as friends have discovered I disagree with them on a contemporary social issue or movement, and as a result, they have withdrawn from fellowship with me. If our fellowship with others is reduced to whether or not they hold the same social or political persuasion we do, we are dividing the body of Christ.

Differing viewpoints are not *sin*. Sin is disobeying what God commands. The NT condemns those who pervert the gospel, or who practice immorality. But today, Christians are dividing over subjective viewpoints. Paul commends the Thessalonians for *not* doing this. Neither should we.

2. The Christian's Victory: Rising above Trials (4)

The second thing Paul highlights is the spiritual victory the Thessalonians Christians had experienced. He writes (4): *therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.*

We don't know what form the persecution in Thessalonica took, but it was severe (1 Thess. 2.14). Paul compares it

with the suffering of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, and he knew what he was talking about: He had once been the 'chief persecutor' of those Christians! He stood by as Stephen was stoned (Acts 7.58; 8.1). He was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians when he met Christ on the road, and believed in Him (Acts 9). That persecution had resulted in Jewish Christians being scattered all over the world.

But in Thessalonica, despite severe persecution, believers were standing strong for Christ. Everywhere Paul went, he boasted of their endurance.

I love the work of 'front line' ministries – like Voice of the Martyrs, Iran Alive, Open Doors, Pioneers, and many others that reach out to the lost and strengthen believers in countries where being a Christian is against the law. I love the stories of believers boldly standing for Christ in the face of persecution. I am motivated to pray for them, for God to strengthen their hearts in prison, or to comfort them as they mourn lost loved ones.

When – and I do mean *when* – persecution is targeted at Bible-believing Christians in America, we will begin to know the inner strength and boldness our brothers and sisters facing persecution about the world know today.

Last week I watched the movie *Infidel*. It's a story based on true events of a Christian, played by Jim Caviezel, who proclaims Jesus as God on an Islamic television talk show, is kidnapped and imprisoned in Iran. The more he suffers, the more his faith grows. Finally, facing a firing squad, a terrorist says to him, "We're not afraid to die;

that's why we're going to win." He replies, "I'm not afraid either." Our victory is not in *avoiding* trials; it is in enduring and persevering through them.

3. The Christian's Vindication: Worthy of the Kingdom (5)

Paul then injects what seems like a startling statement at first (5): *This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.*

Fasten your seat belts: Paul here says that persecution is 'a plain indication' (NAS) or 'manifest evidence' (NKJ) of 'God's righteous judgment.' How can this be?

Paul's answer is that they are suffering persecution *so that they will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God.* Notice, he does *not* say 'worthy of heaven.' We do not earn heaven by going through trials. But endurance in trials will regard us as being 'worthy' in Christ's coming kingdom. He suffered for us; we suffered for Him.

This is the language of divine rewards. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduced this truth:

"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great (Matt. 5.11-12a).

Jesus' apostles knew this. After they had been beaten for preaching about Jesus, we read:

So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. (Acts 5.41)

Paul puts our present sufferings for Christ in context of our future with the Lord:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8.18)

And James reminds us of the value of trials in our lives right now:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1.2-4)

As we'll see next week, some Christians in Thessalonica wrongly thought this persecution was the 'wrath of God' that would come in the Day of the Lord – they thought they were going through the Great Tribulation. Paul says No: The persecution they are enduring is not punishment; it is God's righteous judgment which leads to reward.

When I was in high school, I was on the wrestling team. My brother Jon got me into it, and although I was never as good as him, I did wrestle on the varsity team for two years. Our team was good. Coach Maben – was a former champion, and he worked us hard. After about two hours of learning wrestling moves and having practice matches,

he made us run for twenty minutes – around school halls, up and down steps. We complained, but he never let up. It wasn't fun. It hurt. But when we won tournaments and championships, it was all worth it.

That was our vindication: Everything we endured showed itself in the end – that we were 'worthy' to be champions. And the Christian's vindication will come when we see Jesus face-to-face, and we are considered 'worthy of the kingdom.' An old chorus we used to sing captures this lesson well:

*Sometimes the day seems long, Our trials hard to bear.
We're tempted to complain, to murmur and despair.
But Christ will soon appear to catch his bride away!
All tears forever over in God's eternal day!
It will be worth it all when we see Jesus!
Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ.
One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrow will erase.
So, bravely run the race till we see Christ.*
(Esther Kerr Rusthoi, New Spring, 1941)

Digging Deeper

1. Let's start by getting our historical bearings. After receiving his 'Macedonian Call,' Paul came to Thessalonica, where – despite severe persecution from Jews – he had an enthusiastic response. Increasing persecution forced him to leave prematurely, and he feared the fledgling church might die. A few months later, Paul sent Timothy to check on them; he returned with news that they were doing well, but had some questions about Jesus' return. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to encourage them and answer their questions. But as often happened in letters (just like in emails or texts today!), some things Paul wrote were misunderstood or misrepresented. So he wrote 2 Thessalonians. Read through the letter. What truths is Paul writing to clarify for them?
2. In First Thessalonians, Paul began by thanking God for their faith, love, and hope (1.3), but here in Second Thessalonians, he mentions only faith and love (1.3). This isn't an indictment of the Thessalonian Christians; their growth in faith and love is praised! But can you think of a reason why Paul leaves out any commendation of their 'hope' here?
3. Paul's pride in the endurance of the Thessalonian Christians in the face of persecution is palpable! Think of a time you burst with pride telling others of the achievements of your parents, or siblings, or children. Imagine Paul telling Christians in Corinth or Athens about the Thessalonians. How would this affect Paul and other Christians?
4. Many people struggle to believe in God because of suffering in the world, but Paul's view is diametrically opposed to this. God is *righteous* in allowing persecution of believers, because it is a provision which 'counts us worthy' of Christ. To understand the value of suffering for Christ, read these verses: John 15.19-20; 16.33; Acts 5.41-42; Romans 8.18; 2 Corinthians 1.5; 4.11; Colossians 1.24; 2 Timothy 3.12; James 1.2-4; 1 Peter 1.3-9. How do these verses affect your view of suffering for Christ?