

1 Thessalonians 2.13-20

Suffering for the gospel

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 2 October 2022

Walking Worthily [4]

Recap

Well it's nice to be actually preaching again (writing these words in hope and trust on Saturday afternoon!). I'd like to begin with thanks to Bobbie for preaching for me two weeks ago with about 15 hours' notice, and then Peter for offering to preach last week. It was a great help, and I am very grateful.

So far in this series we've seen the great love Paul had for the Christians in Thessalonica – and we'll continue to see that throughout these two letters. We've seen the wholehearted way the Thessalonians responded to the gospel, with joy and passion. They didn't simply hear the words of the gospel, they took them to heart, and their lives were transformed. We've seen what it looks like to convert, to become a Christian – **turning** away from idols, **servicing** the living God, **waiting** for Jesus' return.

It sounds so positive. It's upbeat. The Thessalonians are a success story, the sort of church that the diocese puts on its annual report to show things aren't so bad after all. But as we'll see today, being disciples of Jesus – people who follow him and learn from him – comes with its challenges too.

Welcoming the Word (13)

I love the word 'welcome'. It has a roundness to it, a warmth – 'welcome'. I hope we'll be doing lots of it this winter as we welcome people into the warmth of this building, for fellowship, food, and hopefully even to share our faith in Jesus.

Paul is thankful in chapter 1 verse 2 – and he's still thankful in chapter 2 – why? – (13) **we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it.** The word there means 'welcomed' like we might welcome a friend into our home. They didn't simply 'accept' **the word of God** as true, they *welcomed* it, they flung the door wide open for God's word, they embraced it as true and powerful.

Here I think Paul is talking not only about the gospel message of repentance and forgiveness, but also the teaching about what it means to *live out* the life Jesus gives – to put it into practice.

All that teaching – along with everything else in what we call the Bible – is something special. If you’ve got your Bible open you’ll see that I very naughtily stopped reading halfway through verse 13. Here it is in full:

We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

1 Thessalonians 2.13 (NIV)

Paul is making a staggering claim here. He says that when he, a man, spoke to them in Thessalonica, it was actually God himself who was speaking to them, through Paul.

It’s an astonishing thing to say – but I believe him. For that is exactly what the Bible is. As we heard in the His Story course last week, the Bible is made up of 66 books, written by about 40 authors across 2,000 years, in many different genres.

The Bible is 100% written by humans in exactly the same way that when Paul spoke to the Thessalonians his words were 100% spoken by a man. But those words, and these words, even though translated, are *also* 100% God’s word to us.

The Holy Spirit was at work when they were written, as the Holy Spirit was at work when Paul was preaching to the Thessalonians. And the Holy Spirit is at work when we read them – and when, with fear and trembling, we preach them – as the Holy Spirit was at work when the Thessalonians listened and responded to Paul.

It's a double miracle: inspired when written, and inspired when read or heard. God was at work as Scripture was written, and today through his word God is **at work in you who believe** (13).

Friends, the Bible is not only the most valuable thing this world affords, it is the most powerful. We shy away from it because it challenges us to see things differently. We shy away from it because it demands that God's people stand out from the crowd. We shy away from it because it invites us to live in a strange new world, of self-denial and worship of something other than my own wants and desires.

But the Christians in Thessalonica – and I hope we too – know that the strange new world of the Bible is the world God made us to live in. I long for us to welcome the Bible **as it actually is, the word of God** – to fling wide the doors, and welcome its truth, authority and power into our daily lives.

Sharing in suffering (14-16)

For then, everything will be alright, nothing will go wrong, and our lives will be easy and free of trouble – yes? *Pause*

No.

I don't know how – well actually I do – but at some point the lie creeps into the way Christians think that says things should be easy. We might not say it like that, but when we face suffering, difficulty, pain, we question our faith. We say, 'God what are you up to?' Believe me I have been asking that question myself my whole life, and in particular over the last few months. (The next few months are going to be incredibly hard for many of us – including people who've never struggled to pay their bills before. It'll be embarrassing, and some of us will need to swallow our pride and admit we need help. Please say – together we have the means to make sure everyone here is warm and fed this winter.)

Nowhere in the Bible does God say or promise that his people will be immune to the struggles of this world. In fact one could argue that it's *worse* for God's people because as well as the normal struggles we have persecution from accepting the gospel, living a counter-cultural life, looking different to everyone else.

Look with me at verse 14.

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 2.14a (NIV)

We pause there, and I wonder what comes to mind? What does it look like to imitate a faithful church?

To my mind it involves a gathering like this one, with the Word being taught and preached, people singing and praying with all their hearts, sharing fellowship with one another – and then during the week living as Christians at home, in the workplace, at school, in the supermarket, worshipping God in everything we do, every day and in every way, blessing others as we are blessed.

If you asked me what it means to imitate, to live as a faithful church – that's what I would say first.

But Paul goes somewhere else.

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: you suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews.

1 Thessalonians 2.14 (NIV)

Paul is right and I am wrong. All those things I said are good things, important things for Christians and churches to work at – but in this world to imitate Christ means to suffer.

After all, look at how the world treated Jesus – do you think it will treat his disciples any better? Paul wasn't on a downer here, he was following Jesus' own teaching:

'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 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. Remember what I told you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.'

John 15.18-21 (NIV)

Friends, we are the odd ones out. All over the world, for 2,000 years our Christian sisters and brothers have faced persecution. Jesus was arrested, falsely accused, beaten and crucified. Paul fled for his life several times, he was beaten and left for dead. The Thessalonians were ridiculed and ostracised by their compatriots.

Although we haven't known it for many years, I believe that persecution is coming for God's people in this country. If we stay faithful to Scripture, to the love *and* holiness that Jesus taught us, the world will hate us. That is the pattern of discipleship.

But it is not all; Jesus' prayer didn't end there. He went on to say,

'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'

John 16.33 (NIV)

In this life, **in this world** God's people **will have trouble**. That might be persecution because of our faith, or it might be health issues or bereavement, it might be struggling to pay our bills this winter, it might be family problems, loneliness, abuse at home.

But in Jesus – and in Jesus *alone* – we can **have peace**. **Peace**, not from pretending that everything is fine, but from trusting that the world doesn't have the last word: God does, and that word is Jesus, who has **overcome the world**.

That's what Paul had taught the Thessalonians – how do I know that? Chapter 1 verses 2 and 3: **we always thank God for... your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus**.

They endured the suffering and persecution they faced not by pretending it wasn't real, nor by watering down their faith to be acceptable to the world, but by fixing their eyes on Jesus, by trusting him and putting their hope in him – confident that as he rose to life on the third day, and ascended into heaven, so no matter what the valley of the shadow of death may bring, he is with us, by our side always, and he has *already* overcome.

The hymn *Before the throne of God above* has a little phrase in it which I love to sing: **my life is hid with Christ on high, with Christ my Saviour and my God.**¹ It comes from Colossians 3:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3.1-4 (NIV)

Paul wrote those words in a Roman prison on false charges. Bad things – even awful things – can and will happen, even to God's people. But ultimately our life is **hidden with Christ**, kept safe, and nothing can separate us from him.

Now at this point I'm aware I've spoken for 20 minutes on the first two verses of our reading. The next two verses, 15 and 16, have been used to justify Christian antisemitism – it's not hard to see why, but it would be wrong to use the verses in that way.

1. Paul himself was a Jew; the depth of feeling comes from being abandoned and persecuted by his own people.
2. Paul had himself treated Christians the way he was now being treated by his own people.
3. The prophets in the Old Testament often spoke about God's people in this way – as did Jesus himself.²
4. Paul was talking about specific people who were opposing and persecuting him – not the Jews as a whole.³ In Romans (chapters 9-11) Paul shows love and hope for his people.

The take-home point here is that those who oppose God and God's people will one day face the consequences of their actions – as will we all. It's not that God is bloodthirsty, he simply gives us real responsibility with real consequences. What God wants is for all of us to do what the Christians in Thessalonica did, to turn **to [him] from idols to serve the living and true God** (1.9) – for then we will live in true freedom, then our life will be **hid with Christ on high**.

Fighting for the faith (17-20)

Paul ends this section of the letter with a heady mix of emotion.⁴ He, Silas and Timothy have been **like young children** (7), **a nursing mother** (7), **a father** (11), and now **orphaned** (17). He describes their **intense longing**, how they **made every effort** to be reunited with their **brothers and sisters**. Their time there had been all too brief, and they were concerned the church wasn't established enough to stand firm in the faith.

But their **way** back was **blocked** – by **Satan** (18). Paul doesn't explain himself – which means there is no point in us speculating what that 'blocking' looked like. But two things are important.

1. Satan is real, and he has real power to oppose and block God's people – even the apostle Paul. We are in a fight, my friends, and the more faithful we are to Jesus, the more we grow in discipleship, the more opposition we will face, from people and from Satan.
2. Satan has real power, but he has already lost. On the cross Jesus defeated the powers of evil and death – so Paul's **hope** (19) is not a weak 'I hope so' but the strong confidence in a future that is assured because of what Jesus has already done;⁵ he has already won the victory.

So the **crowns** Paul talks about (19) has nothing to do with royalty but everything to do with victory – it's **the wreath bestowed on the victor in one of the contests in the games.**⁶

The good news is: that victory is ours in Jesus. We need to keep going and not give up, so one day we will receive the **crowns**, the victor's wreath that is ours in Jesus. We need to stand firm in the faith, abounding in love, growing in holiness. We need to support and encourage one another in tough times. We need to stand and fight against **the devil's schemes** using the weapon God gives us: **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God** (Ephesians 6.17), and **which is at work in you who believe** (13).

Friends, troubles and trials will come. We will face opposition and difficulty. But the victory Jesus won for us can never be taken away. Our **hope**, our **joy**, our **crowns**, our **glory** is secure in Jesus, and will be ours **when he comes** (19).

And so we say amen – come, Lord Jesus.

¹ *Before the throne of God above* by C L Bancroft.

² Stott (BST), 56; Morris (TNTC), 65.

³ Fee (NICNT), 95-96.

⁴ Fee (NICNT), 106.

⁵ See Fee (NICNT), 108.

⁶ Fee (NICNT), 109.