

Trusting through the Trial

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10

Introduction

Like last week, this morning's passage is personal. We will see Paul writing to the church in Thessalonica to encourage them in difficult circumstances. As they were seeking to please God, pursue holiness, and preach the Gospel, the church encountered opposition. Paul, out of concern for their faith, writes to strengthen them in their trouble. The difficult times had come, what would happen to their faith? Would they endure to the end? Did they really want to be like Jesus? Being obedient to the Father, even to the point of death, if necessary? Would they remain steadfast?

I echo Paul's concern for the church this morning. If you are presently suffering or in sorrow because you have sought to honor God, then my goal for you this morning is to encourage you as Paul encouraged the church in Thessalonica. If, however, you are not presently suffering or in sorrow because you have sought to honor God, then my goal is to prepare you for that day. For, according to Jesus, that day will come, when "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). Those are my two goals this morning – 1) To Encourage those suffering for Jesus and 2) To Prepare those who will suffer for Jesus.

In order to do that, I would ask you to turn your attention to 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10...

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10

^{2:17} But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

^{3:1} 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.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Exposition - In order to encourage those who are suffering and prepare those who will suffer for Jesus' sake, I want to highlight three truths from this passage for us this morning. The first is that...

I. Satan wants to hinder you. (Vss. 2:17-20)

As we read verses 17-20, we see Paul in anguish over his inability to be with the church in Thessalonica. He loved them, cared for them, and wanted to travel to see them because he heard that they were suffering on account of their faithfulness to Christ. Yet, though Paul wanted to be with them, he was hindered from making the trip. According to verse 18, he was hindered by Satan. The satanic hindrance that we see in this passage hurt not only Paul but the church in Thessalonica. The church was unable to receive the encouragement that they needed from Paul and Paul's concern for the church was not able to be dispelled until he received the report from Timothy that all was well.

You could think about it in terms of losing the ability to communicate with a loved one while they were traveling. When Hannah was in Ethiopia before I was able to arrive, there was one night in particular when I was almost frantic because I could not reach her. Eventually, I called her over an internet telephone service and was able to speak with the desk clerk and just find out if she was ok. I wanted to know if she was ok and I wanted her to know that we were alright as well. The anxiety was awful. Now, imagine what it must have been like for Paul and the church in Thessalonica. Paul received word that they were suffering but he could not immediately communicate with them. He sent Timothy for a report, but that would take some time. During that waiting period, Paul feared for their faith because it was being tried by suffering and persecution for Jesus' sake.

Now, in terms of what this means for us this morning, we need to recognize that Satan's plan is to hinder us. He wants to make us anxious. He wants to make us worry. He wants to shake our confidence in God. He wants to slow our progress in to obedience to God. If he cannot outright destroy us, then he is just fine to distracting us with worry and provoking doubts in our minds about God's goodness in our suffering. When you sense that the Satan is hindering you from being obedient to God, when you think that your present sufferings will ultimately ruin you, you must remember that this is exactly what Satan wants for you. He wants you to feel abandoned, hopeless, and fearful.

T.S. – Fortunately, Satan is not the only one at work in our suffering. God is also present and working in our trials. We see this in verses 1-5...

II. God wants to sanctify you. (Vss. 3:1-5)

While Satan's desire is to hinder you in the trial, God's plan is to sanctify you, and for the believer, God's purpose will prevail! As the beginning of verse 3 tells us, God intends for our faith to be refined and remain unshaken in the trial. In the trial, God is proving our faith. He is forging our faith in His unshakable promises. In fact, He was designed the trials for this very purpose.

Look with me at verses 3-4 with me again, “For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 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.” In other words, the afflictions that the church in Thessalonica suffered were afflictions that they were “destined for” as believers in Christ. For those of you who have read other letters by the apostle Paul, this statement should not surprise you. In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul writes, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffering persecution.” And, of course, those who have read the words of Jesus in the Gospels know that suffering is the road on which the believer is destined by God to walk before entering the reward of heaven. Jesus says, “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. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:13-14). In Luke 9:23-26, Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

Suffering is not a circumstance that takes God by surprise. Suffering is part of the plan, for it is in the trial that we learn what James teaches in James 1:2-4. James tells us, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” Now, why should we count it joy, James? He tells us in verse 3, “For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have it full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Do you see what God intends in our suffering? While Satan intends to hinder us through suffering, God intends to sanctify through suffering. God has designed the trial not to destroy us, but to free us from our lust and longing for the things of this world. That is why Paul is able to say what he says in Romans 8 regarding all things in our lives. In Romans 8:28-29, he writes, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” What is it the purpose, Paul? Verse 29 tells us, “For those who He foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.” What are those verses telling us? They are telling us that God’s purpose is to make us more conformed to the image of Jesus. In other words, God intends to make us more like Jesus through our suffering.

Again, the apostle Paul helps us in Philippians 3:8-11 to understand the role that suffering plays in the life of the believer, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul is essentially saying, “I will become like Jesus in His death in order to know Him and the power of His resurrection. I will share in Jesus’ suffering, that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

Suffering in this world as a believer serves to wean us off of the toxic nourishment that receive from the “Tempter,” as Paul calls Satan in 1 Thessalonians 3:5. So, while suffering is never pleasant, it is not without purpose. God intends to sanctify us through it. And the blessed promises that we have in the midst of our suffering is that Jesus is with us. He will never leave us nor forsake us. He will finish the work that He began in us. He will bring us through the trial.

T.S. - So, now that we know what God intends to do in our suffering, what will you do in the midst of it? How do you make it through the suffering? Verses 6-10 tell us...

III. You must entrust yourself to God (Vss. 6-10)

Paul was writing to strength the faith of the church. They need faith. They need to entrust themselves to God like Christ did when He was suffering for His obedience to the Father. Just like the church in Thessalonica, your faith and my faith need to be strengthened by the truth that God is at work in the trial. He does not intend to harm us without healing us. For though “he causes grief, He will have compassion according to the abundance of His steadfast love. He does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men” (Lamentations 3:31-33).

Faith lays hold of the power of God to persevere even when the circumstances obscure our view of His power and disrupt our peace.

Conclusion

So, when you feel like giving up, when you feel like there is no hope to make it out of the trial, when you question whether you really want to be like Jesus, being faithful even in suffering, I want you to remember that Satan wants to hinder you, God wants to sanctify you, and you need to entrust yourself to God!

Suffering in the service of God the Father is what it means to really be like Jesus. There is no path of faithfulness to Jesus, there is no pursuit of holiness, there is no obedience to God that does not include suffering, sorrow, trial, or tribulation in some form. If you are looking for an easy life, then stay away from Jesus. Serving Jesus is not safe, but it is good.

Don't lose hope this morning! Don't give up believing in the goodness of God! He is faithful! He is worthy! Let us press on by faith in Jesus to a life of godliness, even when the trials and sorrows threaten to undo us. He will hold you fast!