

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

Standing with Our Suffering Family

Study #4

(1 Thessalonians 2:14-20)

Introduction: ONE with those who suffer...

We who have placed our trust in Jesus for salvation delight in the promises of God. And God has given us many wonderful promises in the Bible. For instance...

- In Hebrews 13:5, God promises, *“I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you”*
- Jesus says, in John 14:27, *“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you”*
- In the Old Testament Nehemiah promised the people of God, [Nehemiah 8:10]... *“the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

These are all great promises. But, among the promises we find in Scripture are some that are a bit more sobering.

Jesus gives us these promises:

- John 16:33 - ***“...IN THE WORLD YOU HAVE TRIBULATION”***
- John 15:20 - ***“IF THEY PERSECUTED ME, THEY WILL ALSO PERSECUTE YOU”***
- Luke 21:12 - ***“THEY WILL LAY THEIR HANDS ON YOU AND WILL PERSECUTE YOU, DELIVERING YOU TO THE SYNAGOGUES AND PRISONS, BRINGING YOU BEFORE KINGS AND GOVERNORS FOR MY NAME’S SAKE.”***

The Apostle Paul adds these promises:

- 2 Timothy 3:12 - ***Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.***
- Philippians 1:29 - ***For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake***

And Peter chimes in with this:

- 1 Peter 3:14 - ***But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled***

God gives promises both delightful and difficult.

He gives us the difficult ones so that we won’t be surprised when the inevitable hard times come our way.

And He gives us the delightful ones to carry us through the times of challenge. In fact, those delightful promises about peace and joy and the assurances of His constant presence in our lives are most precious to us when we are in the throes of suffering.

Today is **The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.**¹ Today, our hearts and minds are drawn to the theme of persecution both by the special day and by the portion of Scripture in front of us.

During the next few minutes:

we’ll be exposed to a church in the first century that endured its share of suffering just because it was faithfully following Jesus;
we’ll be exposed to believers who are suffering today just because they are faithfully following Jesus;
and we’ll consider appropriate responses we, who are not facing overt persecution, can make to the plight of our suffering family around the world.

¹ Persecute: to harass, especially because of religion.

Review: The church at Thessalonica was a very healthy church!

The first century church in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica was a church of unforgettable impact. And last Sunday, looking at one verse, we discovered the reason for that impact.

[1 Thessalonians 2:13] For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

They received the Christian Gospel for what it was - **the Word of God**. Because of their manner of receiving it, that Word had a life-changing impact in the lives of those believers. The church, comprised of changed Christians, had a tremendous impact in its city as well as on the whole surrounding region.

Not that life was easy for the Thessalonian Christians...

The believers who made up the church at Thessalonica did not grow because they were living in a perfect environment. Life was tough for these followers of Jesus.

Paul knew how tough things were for them. And he wanted to remind them that things had been tough on followers of Jesus from the very beginning.

Faithful in Suffering (vv. 14)

[14] For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches² of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews

² “Church” in Greek is ecclesia (ἐκκλησία). It is not necessarily a word that refers to a religious community. In fact, ecclesia is never used to refer to the religious brotherhoods of the Greeks. The New Testament writers used ecclesia (the word means “those who are called out”) to identify the uniqueness of the Christian community.

Suffering in Judea

Suffering was a part of the experience of the early church. Within a very short time after the church was birthed, strong opposition surfaced in Jerusalem.

- The apostles were arrested for spreading the news about Jesus and were commanded to stop talking about Him (Acts 4 - Peter and John).
- When the apostles kept on spreading the Gospel, they were arrested again and beaten (Acts 5 - an unidentified number of the apostles).
- Not much later, a church leader, Stephen, was stoned to death for his bold testimony about Jesus (Acts 7).
- Following this stoning, widespread persecution broke out with house to house raids that forced many believers to flee Jerusalem.

Paul brings up the early church’s suffering when writing to the Thessalonians to remind them that their experience of suffering was not unique. In fact, suffering as a Christian for being a Christian had been the norm from Pentecost forward.

Suffering in Thessalonica

After an uneventful beginning, opposition surfaced very quickly in Thessalonica. When Paul & Company blew into town, they presented the case for Jesus being the long-awaited Messiah on three consecutive Sabbaths in the Jewish synagogue.

And a few from the Jewish community believed. So did “[Acts 17:4] a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women of the city.

But the Jews who didn’t believe became jealous of the Gospel’s success, formed a mob and started a riot in opposition to the Christian message.³

³ Judean churches endured persecution at the hands of the Jews. But nothing we are talking about today should lead in any way to anti-Semitism! The New Testament never implies that all Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus. It does say that some Jews delivered Jesus over to be crucified and that some Gentiles put Him to death and that He suffered and died for the sins of ALL people. You and I are also

Some of the new converts, including a man named Jason, were arrested and brought before the city authorities. The Christians were accused of treason against Caesar. (How's **THAT** for an introduction to what life in Christ is all about?!)

Then, the apostles left Thessalonica for Berea, another city in Macedonia. Things went well in Berea - until the Jews who had opposed Paul in Thessalonica came over to Berea to stir up trouble there, too!

It wasn't long before the opposition forced Paul to leave Berea. And at that point the Jewish opposition that had followed them to Berea went back home to Thessalonica.

And what do you think they did when they got back home? I can only imagine that they continued to make life miserable for the Christians in Thessalonica!⁴

And what thoughts might have been swirling around in the minds of the Thessalonians as they experienced one attack after another, one accusation after another, one wave of persecution after another?

Is it possible that they were beginning to wonder, "*Are we doing something wrong? Has God forgotten us? Has He withdrawn His blessing?*"

To which Paul would have responded, "*No! You're doing everything right. God has not forgotten you. You are still His treasured people. Followers of Jesus have suffered at the hands of the opposition from day one. Being opposed for following Christ is actually a sign that you're doing well.*"

And he would say the same things to Christians who are suffering today.⁵

responsible for the sufferings of Christ! But, the particular persecutors of the believers in the early days of the church in Judea were Jews.

⁴ Surely the Thessalonian Christians would have been excommunicated from the synagogue. Other sufferings are likely.

⁵ "Persecution in some form is the common lot of Christians and always must be in the nature of the case." (Morris, 1 Thessalonians commentary)

Suffering in 2007

It is certainly conceivable that any of us could be on the receiving end of some level of persecution.

I've known people who have taken a stand for Christ and have been shunned from their family and sneered at in professional circles. Identifying yourself as a devoted follower of Jesus could, in our culture, lead to being passed over for a promotion at work or being ridiculed at school.

But such opposition is not yet widespread here (especially in the "Bible Belt" south). However, as you heard in Todd's presentation and prayer earlier, persecution against Christians is a current, widespread, and life-threatening reality in many parts of the world today.

Wide swaths of our planet represent danger zones for Christians.

And you and I are especially honored that, among those our church supports who have gone out for the sake of the Name of Jesus, several serve Him in what are referred to as "creative access" countries.

At Northwest Community Church, we are financial and prayer partners with some who serve in India, China, Morocco, Uganda and (soon) Israel. Generally speaking, Christian missionaries are not welcomed in these countries. So, in some cases, the individuals and families we support live where they do "under cover."

We support others who have ministries that include travel to some of the most dangerous places on earth for Christians: Columbia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Thailand, Peru, Nigeria, and Russia.

These folks share Christ secretly, are often exposed to danger, live and travel inconveniently, and take on serious risks for the sake of the Gospel.

And the dangers the missionaries face are typically not as great as the dangers faced by the national Christians in those countries. The citizens of some of these countries may be imprisoned, suffer loss of property, endure beatings and torture as well as loss of life - just because they are living for Jesus!

In many places, things have not changed much in the last two thousand years. In many places, the Thessalonian situation repeats daily.

The letter continues, as Paul now writes about the persecutors, not just the persecuted.

The persecutors of the Christians in Thessalonica were both Jews and Greeks. The persecutors of the Christians in Jerusalem were solely Jews.

And Paul (a Jew himself), in the most passionate outburst found in any of his letters, recounts the track record of his people throughout their history. When it comes to accepting God's spokesmen, the Jews' track record is not great...

The Persecutors (vv. 15-16)

Their Actions (vv. 15-16a)

[15] who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, [16a] hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved;

Liable in the death of Jesus and many prophets

Technically, Jesus was put to death by the Romans (crucifixion was a punishment that only they could apply). But the Romans put Him to death only because the Jews delivered Him up to them. So Paul says that they **“killed the Lord Jesus.”**

Over the centuries of Old Testament history, they had killed, persecuted, rejected and otherwise mistreated the prophets God sent their way.⁶ So wholesale was their rejection of God's messengers that in the sermon Stephen preached before he was stoned to death he asked his opponents, *[Acts 7:52] “Which of the prophets did your fathers NOT persecute?”*

⁶ Among them Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah - not the author of the book by the same name, see 2 Chronicles 24, most of the Minor Prophets who were, at least not listened to, and John the Baptist!

The Jews were called to be the source of blessing to the whole world. But in persecuting those who preached the Christian Gospel, they were plugging up the flow of blessing.⁷

Drove out Paul and his friends

Paul reminds us that it was the Jews who first drove him and Silvanus and Timothy out of Thessalonica and then out of Berea!

These opponents were doing everything they could to keep people from hearing the Gospel.

And this behavior is what prompted Paul to write his harshest words - *[15]...They are not pleasing to God, but hostile⁸ to all men.*

Obviously, persecutors of Christians hurt the Christians they persecute. But they also hurt the non-Christians who will never hear the Gospel because they have persecuted the Christians who could have preached the Gospel!

There were Thessalonians and other Macedonians who never heard the Gospel because of the treatment that the Jewish and Gentile persecutors heaped on the Christians. And the result of withholding the Gospel is that those who never hear never get the chance to be saved.

The stakes don't get any more serious than that. And the same phenomenon is occurring all around the world today.

Persecutors do the same today

Today, in the countries I've already mentioned and in many more, those who believe in the same Jesus you and I do have been beaten and tortured. They have lost homes and seen their churches destroyed, have been maimed for life, have been sold into slavery and have lost family members to martyrdom.

⁷ See Matthew 23:13, 32; Genesis 15:16

⁸ “Hostile” = “contrary” (as in winds that blow contrary to where they need to blow to do the most good).

Persecutors in their lands have done to them what the opposition did to the Thessalonians in AD 50. Such suffering is documented by many sources, but I've found the most comprehensive, reliable, and helpful source to be an organization called **The Voice of the Martyrs**.

We subscribe to **The Voice of the Martyrs** monthly magazine. Kathy and I count it a privilege to contribute to this ministry that exists solely to support the persecuted church. I commend this ministry to your consideration when you are looking to make Kingdom investments.

The Voice of the Martyrs is a tremendous source of news about world events that concerns the persecution of Christians. **Voice of the Martyrs** also provides a great resource in telling us to pray for our brothers and sisters who are suffering for Jesus.

Their website is www.persecution.com. Once there, you can register, browse the site and learn about the progress of the Gospel in hard to reach places like Vietnam and Iran.

You can find prayer requests about countries where there is no religious freedom. You can buy books that will educate you and inspire you with the stories of those who have stood firm for the Lord while undergoing unspeakable hardships by those who oppose the faith.

And you'll discover "overcoming faith" in the stories you'll read from the lives of your suffering family members.

Persecution is not anything that any of us would wish upon our brothers and sisters. But those who are persecuted tell us that suffering for the sake of Jesus crystallizes what is most important in life. There's a sanctifying cleansing that happens in the heart of the believer who entrusts himself or herself to God while suffering for the faith.

And just as the first century church was not exterminated by the persecution they suffered, but rather came to know the Lord in powerful ways while enduring mistreatment for Him, the same thing is happening in many places today.

I certainly don't want to romanticize suffering, but it is still true that persecution has often served to purify, fortify and galvanize the church to accomplish great things for God.

Sadly, while the church is strengthened through persecution (Tertullian's famous words are true - "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church"), those who persecute are putting themselves into a horrible position.

Their Fate (v. 16b)

[16b]... with the result that they (the persecutors) always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them⁹ to the utmost.¹⁰

Here's some sobering stuff. Those who set themselves against the church are setting themselves up against God.

Paul knew this firsthand. Before becoming a Christian he was a violent persecutor of Christians. Arresting, beating, and killing Christians was his specialty.

But when he was confronted while on the road to Damascus by God for his actions, the Lord's exact words to him must have been overwhelming: "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*"

When, confused, Saul asked the Voice, "*Who are You, Lord?*" the Voice answered, "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!*" (Acts 9:4-5)

To persecute Christians is to persecute Jesus, the King of kings and the Lord of lords! Persecutors of Christians antagonize God. They bring God's wrath upon themselves.

Wrath against the persecutors

So ultimately, persecution hurts the persecutor more than the persecuted in that their actions heap up additional sins for which they are guilty before God and will be judged by God.

Ultimately, the persecuted will be vindicated.¹¹ And those who hinder the spread of the Gospel will face the wrath of God.

⁹ Aorist tense in "has come" indicating, not the imminence, but the certainty of God's wrath falling on them.

¹⁰ Phillips - Alas, I fear they are completing the full tale of their sins, and the wrath of God is over their heads.

Having tasted not the wrath, but the mercy of God, it is not surprising that the persecuted often respond with mercy and grace toward those who are persecuting them.

The response of the persecuted to the persecutor's plight

The annals of Christian history are filled with the stories of believers responding to their tormentors exactly as Jesus did when He was crucified, [Luke 23:34]...*“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*

Richard Wurmbrand, the founder of **Voice of the Martyrs**, was a faithful Romanian pastor who suffered tremendously in Soviet Union prisons for the Name of Christ.

Wurmbrand wrote several books, one of which, Tortured for Christ, recounts some of his experiences and those of others who were sentenced to imprisonment and torture. He writes of how he prayed for his persecutors and of witnessing fellow Christians praying for their tormentors while suffering terrible persecution.¹²

The plain truth is that the worst a persecutor can do to a Christian is kill him, which is a death sentence to Heaven.

But the persecutor faces an eternity separated from God in Hell. Christians with God's perspective see the wrath that is falling on those who cause their suffering and pray for their persecutor's salvation!

That was Paul's own practice. When writing to the Christians in Rome, he added these thoughts about his fellow Jews - [9:2]...*I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart*” and [10:1]...*my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.*”

Many in the persecuted church today pray fervently for their persecutors who have not yet tasted God's grace. They are under the wrath of God and the persecuted want their persecutors to find the same mercy they themselves have found!

As Paul wrote to his friends in Thessalonica, he knew all about their suffering. And it grieved him to be separated from them.

The Glory of an Overcomer's Faithfulness! (vv. 17-20)

Partnership with Those who Suffer

[17] But we, brethren,¹³ having been taken away¹⁴ from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.

Paul and his friends - parted!

Earlier, Paul described himself as the Thessalonian Christian's “mother” and “father” and “brother.” Now, he uses another family image to communicate how painful it was to have been forced to leave them so soon after they came to faith.

The word that Paul uses here to describe the separation (“*taken away*”) is one that was used to describe an orphaning situation.

He wants them to think that he is the one who was orphaned when he had to go on to Berea. He was the one who was pained, just as an orphaned child is the one who is pained when parents are taken out of his life. Paul longed for the Thessalonians more than words could describe.

¹¹ Perhaps Paul is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), just a few years away by the Romans. Paul views it as so certain that it is as good as having happened. Or he may have in mind God's wrath which will fall on all who fail to believe in Jesus. Or he may be referring to the time of the Tribulation which will surely come because of their rejection of Jesus. This is probably what he is talking about, as he writes elsewhere in this epistle about the Tribulation period and wrath together.

¹² “I have seen Christians in Communist prisons with fifty pounds of chains on their feet, tortured with red-hot iron pokers, in whose throats spoonfuls of salt had been forced, being kept afterwards without water, starving, whipped, suffering from cold - and praying with fervor for the Communists.” (p. 55)

¹³ Note “brothers” again.

¹⁴ In the first century, when someone wanted to reference a baby being abandoned/orphaned by its parents, they would use this word.

It was not at all “out of sight, out of mind.” He was desperate for them. It wasn’t his choice to have left Thessalonica. The enemies of the Gospel had forced him out.

Paul and the Thessalonians are still joined at the heart, even if physically separated. And he’s hoping - soon! - to see them face to face!¹⁵

Passionate about a reunion

It is likely that some at Thessalonica were saying that Paul did not want to return to them. Those who objected to the message of the Gospel probably were saying that he didn’t care enough to come back. They were trying to discredit him by a charge of neglect.

But nothing could have been further from the truth! With all his heart he wanted to go back to Thessalonica despite whatever danger was associated with going there.

We can hardly imagine how encouraging it would have been for the Thessalonians (those persecuted young Christians) to have read of Paul’s passion for them?

But to this point he had not been able to make it back. And Paul seems to know why.

Satan’s Opposition

[18] For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul,¹⁶ more than once—and yet Satan¹⁷ hindered us.

¹⁵ In fact, he said that he “lusted” to see their face! That is the way the word we translate “eager with great desire” is usually rendered. *Επιτηρυμια* - lust - strong passion!

¹⁶ It is rare for Paul to insert his own name in the middle of a letter. Shows intense emotion.

¹⁷ Paul must have given the church at Thessalonica, a primarily Gentile church with little if any background in Jewish teaching, instruction about the adversary, since he names SATAN, without explanation, assuming that they would understand who he was talking about.

Satanic opposition then

He had made plans to visit Thessalonica. And there had been nothing wrong with the plans. They were good plans. Ministry plans. Plans to serve Christ and His people.

But the plans didn’t work out. Paul says that SOMEBODY put a roadblock in the way, making the road to Thessalonica impassable.

In the ancient world, when a military force wanted to keep an advancing army from making progress, they would set up a road block by felling trees and laying them across the road.

We don’t know what roadblock Paul encountered that kept him from visiting his friends in Thessalonica. But we do know that the roadblock was put in place by Satan.

Does it surprise you that the Apostle Paul attributed his inability to visit Thessalonica to satanic opposition?

Paul’s purpose in wanting to return to Thessalonica was so that he could provide additional spiritual nurture to these young Christians. It makes perfect sense that the enemy would want to stop such a thing from happening!

Was illness to blame for his not being able to make it? Was the hindrance an official city policy banning Paul from entering Thessalonica?¹⁸

We don’t know what the roadblock was. But from Paul’s comment, we do know that Satan is a player in the affairs of this world. He made an impact on the ministry plans of the Apostle Paul in the first century.

And it would naïve to think that Satan doesn’t make an impact on ministry plans in the twenty-first century.

¹⁸ Obviously, we don’t have a clue as to what the hindrance was, yet it seems that Paul expected the Thessalonians to know.

Satanic opposition now

Satanic opposition to the plans and purposes of God are no less real today than they were in the first century.

And it is not overreaction to conclude that the enemy has a hand in obstacles you face in doing what is in your heart to do for God. (After all, “satan” means “adversary.” He is YOUR adversary.)

We understand from the scenario Paul provides (and from many other places in Scripture) that on occasion Satan is given permission to hinder the work of God’s servants.

For reasons God does not reveal to us, He sometimes permits Satan to do things that that make life harder for us, that even keep us from serving Him in some ways that we would long for - but that in the long run will end up bringing Him glory and working for our own growth.¹⁹

So -
when our missionary friends are having trouble getting visas that will allow them to stay in a country that is hostile to Christianity; or
when they are having trouble getting permission from officials to start a business so that they can stay in country; or
when they experience health problems at a critical time of the year when there is an open door for ministry -

we would do well to think as Paul thought, and pray against the “*spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6).

And when you want to accomplish something great for God and run into all kinds of obstacles and roadblocks and hindrances, don’t believe it is all happenstance coincidence or bad luck. Satan might be opposing you.

And in case that is the case, your best recourse will be to prayer that the Lord will overwhelm your adversary!

¹⁹ Note the book of Job, where Job suffered terribly because God gave Satan permission to afflict Job - and Job only found out about it at the very end of the time of affliction. While it was going on, Job didn’t have a clue.

Now, back to the conclusion of our passage with one final thought.

Paul had good friends in Thessalonica. They were living in the lion’s den, but were standing firm for Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 confirm that there is no greater honor or joy than to link arms with suffering Christian brothers and sisters.

Blessing to the Persecuted!

[19] For who is our hope²⁰ or joy²¹ or crown²² of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming²³? [20] For you are our glory and joy.

There is great content to these words - but I’m not going to parse verbs and I’m not going to take a long time to try and explain meanings.

The two verses, taken together simply mean, “*I’m proud of you and I’m honored to be your partner.*”

And as it was in the first century so it is today. We are proud of our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering for Jesus and we are honored to be their partners in serving Jesus.

²⁰ Hope - Their development was what he lived for as a parent lives to see his children grow up to maturity, to produce and to reproduce.

²¹ Joy - they filled his life with sunshine as he thought of what they used to be, what they had become, and they would be by the grace of God.

²² Crown - They themselves were the symbol of God’s blessing on his life and ministry.

²³ “Coming” = “parousia” - this is the first time Paul has ever used the phrase, chronologically, in any of his writings. It refers to Jesus’ return. It was the word describing a royal visit to a city.