

Appointed Unto Suffering

Call to Worship: Psalm 63:1-5

1st Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Hymn #81- *A Mighty Fortress*

Hymn #192- *Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted*

Hymn Insert- *Blessed Be Your Name*

Introduction:

Paul has gone out of his way to fervently express how deeply concerned he was for the welfare of the Thessalonian brethren. After being chased out of Thessalonica, quite prematurely, he and his companions (Silas and Timothy) had taken great pains to get back to the Thessalonians, but they were continually hindered by Satan. Paul had such a deep love for the brethren, because he had a deep love for Christ, whose profound love for Paul, compelled Paul to love His sheep. They were his glory and joy.

This morning, as we move into chapter 3, we will find Paul continuing to unburden his heart, as he explains what they finally did, after making several unsuccessful attempts to get back to the Thessalonians. And it is within this context, that we will come across a critical nugget of truth, which addresses Christian sufferings and afflictions.

I. Timothy is Sent Alone

"Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this" (vs. 1-3).

It got to the point that they could not wait any longer. Their attempts to get back to Thessalonica were frustrated over and over again. Too much time was passing, and they needed to know how the brethren there were doing? Were they standing firm in the faith, in the midst of great persecution, without their spiritual parents being able to be there with them? Or, were they compromising? Did they cave into the opposition and throw up the red flag of apostasy? Somehow, they needed to get to them, to help mend the wounds of the enemy, with spiritual encouragement and nourishment. However, with Paul being the main speaker, and evident

leader, it would be presently impossible for them to go back together. Paul was a marked man. He was the one, who was specifically chased out of Berea even, to the coast, leaving Silas and Timothy behind, as he sailed off to Athens.

And so, what was their best bet? Ideally, they'd all like to go together, but that is a non-option at this point. And so, they send the young Timothy, who having not made the waves that Paul had made, could probably slip in, under the radar, and get to the Thessalonians. Paul and Silas would stay back at Athens for now, sending Timothy off, with a two pronged mission:

1) Timothy would seek to establish the church there at Thessalonica. The church at Thessalonica was very young. Paul and his companions had to leave, after being there for three to four weeks; hardly enough time to establish a church amongst a large number of converts. Having to flee, left him no time to establish the Thessalonians in their new found faith. Having to flee in the face of great persecution, which would continue to beat up against the walls of this fledgling church, made things even more difficult. What would the Thessalonians do now? Where does the church go from here? How would they handle this opposition as novices in the faith? Having hardly been planted; the foundation's cement, not yet setting, as it were, the church was shaken abruptly and needed a sense of direction and order. It needed to be firmly planted and settled, so that it would continue on and persevere in God's grace; so that it would know how to conduct itself as a church, until the Lord Jesus Christ returns. Timothy was sent to do this, and to help bring biblical order to the present chaos.

2) In keeping with establishing the church, and especially in light of the present conflict, Timothy was sent to provide the Thessalonians with much needed encouragement (vs. 2). Timothy was to encourage; to solidify and build up their courage. Why? So that they would not grow weary or faint; so that they would push forward in their faith and not give up.

And why was this necessary? Well, encouragement is always necessary for the people of God, but the Thessalonians, who were facing great persecution, especially needed encouragement, lest they fall apart in light of the persecution they were presently facing. And so, Timothy was sent to help strengthen their faith, by encouraging them (solidifying their courage), which would enable them to persevere. And how would he do this? Of course, by use of God's

Word; the Holy Spirit's means of encouraging God's people. And what is that specific Word, suited to address the Thessalonian's present context of suffering and affliction?

In verse 3, Paul provides it, "...that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this." And so, Timothy was to encourage the Thessalonians by reminding them that their suffering was neither unique or unusual, but rather, par for the Christian course. They need not be shaken or overwhelmed with terror because of their present afflictions. They need not be tempted to think that something is wrong with their faith or with Christianity as a whole for that matter? Why? Because suffering and affliction are part of the ordained allotment for the Christian life. All, who wish to inherit the blessings of Christ, will suffer with Him. It is, in fact, appointed by God, as Paul states here in our text.

And so, rather than be ultimately surprised or shattered with terror over the reality of their present afflictions, the Thessalonians could actually take comfort in knowing that, at the deeper level, while the opposition meant it for harm, these very afflictions were appointed by their God unto a good purpose for the Thessalonians; namely, their personal sanctification and growth in Christ. Paul says, "for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this." It's in the job description, as it were. And even as God has appointed your coming to Christ for the blessed inheritance of salvation from your sins, and eternal life, He has likewise determined to rescue you from the power of sin and its remaining influence in you. And the process of accomplishing this rescue, involves the necessity of suffering and affliction. And so, God has a divine calendar, and on that calendar, He has set times, within which, He appoints every last detail of the sufferings of His people. And therefore, even in the face of the evil intended by created beings (man or demon), Christians can take comfort in knowing full well that God will only allow/cause His appointed good to result in us, by means of every particle of the afflictions that we must endure. And that is very, very encouraging! Is the process itself always enjoyable? No. In fact, it can be very painful. But, it is very encouraging nonetheless, to have the assurance that it is all tempered by God, with not a hint of pain too much, unto the accomplishing of His perfect will in us. [Even those who had been martyred were not martyred unto a dead hope... Chapter 4]

And so, Timothy was to go and remind them of the bigger picture at work, in the midst of their very real, tangible and painful afflictions, so that they would not be buried in confusion and

doubt, wondering if such affliction was consistent with the Christian Faith. Now, they should have already known this? How? Because Paul had told them about this from the outset, when he was there (vs. 4). However, like the rest of us, it would not be unlike the Thessalonians to potentially lose sight of this hidden spiritual reality, in the face of present, tangible suffering. And so, Timothy would go there to remind them, and to encourage them to this end.

Notice, Paul adds in verse 4, "For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened and you know."

Again, Timothy would remind them of what they were already told, that this was all par for the course. And indeed, as they had foretold, it happened, both to Paul (and his companions) and the Thessalonians.

And then, finally, again revealing the agony of his own paternal heart, Paul states a personal reason for sending Timothy. Indeed, Timothy would go to seek to establish and encourage the Thessalonian church, but also, he would return to Paul with a report, concerning how they were holding up, in the face of such great affliction and tribulation. Notice, in verse 5, Paul adds, "For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain."

Paul could not handle the tension of not knowing any longer. He had tried over and over again to get to the Thessalonians, but too much time was passing. And so, he needed to know whether they were standing firm in their faith or not. Could the enemy have gotten to them? Could he have tempted them away from Christ, by means of the persecutions and tribulations they were facing? In the short time that he was there, Paul had invested his heart and soul in the Thessalonians; he had begun to know and love them; great things were happening, and he needed to see what had come of it all, since he was thrust out. Had the tempter gotten to them and rendered Paul's work vain? Or, were the Thessalonians persevering in the faith? Timothy would serve, therefore, to report back to Paul, concerning these things. And next time, Lord willing, we will find that that is exactly what Timothy had done.

II. Closing Thoughts and Applications

Having worked through our text for this morning, brethren, let us then conclude our time by considering a few closing thoughts and applications:

1) See in Paul, another example of the biblical precedent being set, for seeking to fulfill *all* of the tenets of the great commission. Paul was not content to merely *convert* and baptize sinners. He saw the importance of establishing churches, where all of the tenets of Christ's great commission could be fulfilled. He didn't merely evangelize, but he further planted, Christ centered churches, where saints could continually learn "whatsoever things the Lord Jesus Christ has taught His disciples," concerning their growth in grace and obedience. Now, why do I say this? Because, many in our day have come to embrace para-church organizations that put all of the emphasis on evangelism, with no equal emphasis on discipleship in a biblically grounded church.

Why didn't Paul just go on, and forget about the Thessalonians? After all, they seemed to have been converted? Isn't that enough? Why did Paul spend 1 1/2 years at Corinth, and more time in Ephesus, if "saving souls" was the ultimate end of his ministry? Paul wanted to see them established in a well-doctrined organism, where mutual edification could constantly take place, and that, under the leadership of God-ordained elders. Paul was concerned not only for "soteriology" (the doctrine of salvation) but also for "ecclesiology" (the doctrine of the church).

And so, unlike many throughout the more recent times, Paul would not have been committed to drive-by evangelism and crusades, that are not directly attached to, indeed springing out of, local churches. And why is this? Because God is as equally concerned about our sanctification and growth in Christ, as He is with our salvation in Christ. God is in the business of saving souls, but not with salvation from hell being the *ultimate* end of His design. Rather, He aims to form more and more of Christ in us, saving us from both the penalty and the power and influence of sin. [The beauty of our redemption, brethren, is not merely being spared hell, but rather, it is further being conformed to Christ! It is not merely being spared from the judgment and wrath of God, but it is further being fixed of all that is broken in us!]

And so, that ministry, which seeks to divide the great commission into any combination of its parts, while neglecting any one of the individual parts, is not a ministry, which ultimately

serves the design, purpose and will of God. And recognizing this ultimate divine purpose of God, in our salvation, brings us to understand a second critical point then...

2) Because God is not only saving us from a penalty, but is also delivering us from the contamination which has resulted in the penalty, let us ever be reminded that we are appointed unto suffering. It is through the sculpting tools of affliction that God shapes us more and more into the image of His Son, so that we might bear fruit unto His glory. When God takes the dead branch and grafts it into Christ, He prunes it and makes it a branch, which will now bear fruit. And that is why every branch in Christ must bear fruit. And so, the temporal sufferings of our bodies is producing in us a far greater weight of glory. The temporal value of our bodily comforts is sacrificed for the far greater eternal value of obtaining Christ-likeness. And so, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, though the outward man is perishing, we are being renewed inwardly day by day. And there is really no ultimate loss in the physical sense as well, for that matter, because in the end, our bodies also will be raised anew at the final resurrection. And so, the breaking down of our temporal bodies serves the blessing of our spiritual resurrection in the present, and this will in turn lead into our physical resurrection when Christ returns. Nothing is ultimately lost then.

And that is why the Apostle Paul not only avoided hiding this from the Thessalonians, even from the outset (although he had only been among them for a few weeks), but furthermore, he very clearly told them of the reality of the suffering that they should and ought to expect. In other words, our being appointed unto suffering is not some hidden secret that must be kept from new believers. Rather, it holds a critical theological place in the believers heart, right from the beginning, as he understands the very purpose of this suffering, being for our sanctification and for the greater glory of God. It's too bad that many in the Charismatic Movement have contradicted this critical teaching, by teaching a prosperity (here and now) gospel, which has done great harm to the true gospel and the church. We are appointed unto suffering, brethren. But the fruit of this suffering is invaluable and precious.

However, this reality also brings us to another application...

3) Because suffering is appointed for the Christian, God has ordained that mutual encouragement is necessary for our perseverance. Notice again, Paul acknowledges that the

Thessalonians (like himself and like all Christians) are appointed unto suffering, and at the same time, he recognizes the proneness to grow weary or doubtful during the process of suffering, which drives him to send Timothy to establish them and to encourage them in their faith.

And so, suffering is par for the course, brethren, and for good reason. But, God has provided us with a critical means of help; an aid, to help carry us through that suffering. And that critical means of help is mutual encouragement. God communicates and administers grace to His suffering children, by way of others, who also house His Holy Spirit.

You see, suffering warrants such encouragement from the brethren, because the one who is suffering is more prone toward forgetting the truth, and caving into all kinds of doubts, brought about by the evil one. The wolf strikes when the sheep are most vulnerable, and we are most vulnerable, during times of suffering. And so, we need others to come along side of us, so as to encourage us (to help rejuvenate our courage, so that we might yet persevere, and benefit from the blessing that is to come by our suffering, if we endure through it, without being crushed to despair at the same time).

And what really is encouragement? What is the anatomy of encouragement? Is it not, most often, the practice of bringing to mind what we already know, but have perhaps lost sight of? It is to graciously and wisely apply the Word of God to the wounds of the afflicted, like a healing ointment; like aloe to the burn. Afflictions can tempt us to have wrong thoughts about God, and wrong thoughts about our relationship to God, and wrong thoughts about our circumstances. And so, sound, biblical, objective thoughts, coming from outside of us, by other Spirit filled brethren, is what God will use to help carry us forward, so that we might receive God's ordained benefits from our present afflictions.

And so, brethren, recognize again the critical importance of maintaining a consciously caring body of believers, who are armed with encouragement from the Scriptures, ready to give and ready to receive encouragement. Mutual encouragement!

4) Note one last observation, considering what we know about God, and what we see happening with Timothy here. Paul is stuck in a predicament here, isn't he? He wants to get back (and rightly so), but he can't. And so, what happens? Timothy is sent to do the work instead.

Consider God's providential grooming of Timothy as one of the blessed outcomes of this difficult dilemma. There are many things that God can and does accomplish through individual providences, probably far beyond our comprehension. In fact, we get this letter to the Thessalonians, delivered to us as Holy Scripture, in part, because Paul was unable to get to the Thessalonians. But, keeping in mind that Timothy was somewhat of a protege of Paul, who would be called to carry the torch, upon Paul's death (1-2 Timothy), we can look at times like this as critical grooming points for the much younger Timothy.

Remember, one of the concerns that Paul had for Timothy, is that he would not be intimidated because of his age. He sought to encourage boldness in his young protege. Well, here, Divine providence ordains a situation where the veteran apostle is put on the bench, as it were, so that Timothy could receive further grooming for the role that he will play in the building of Christ's church. Here, Timothy would be compelled to take on responsibilities that he might not take on, if Paul and Silas are with him. He must take the lead, in a certain sense. And so, brethren, I say this just to encourage us to look beyond some of the harsh providences of life, to seek to behold some of what God might be accomplishing through them. To be sure, God is working in everyone here: The Thessalonians, Paul, Silas...etc, but I wanted to put the magnifier on Timothy, to at least highlight one great benefit of the present dilemma.

5) To the unbeliever... God's purpose in all things.

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25