

1 Thessalonians 2 (13-14) – Live Like the Cost is Worth it

What has cost you, but has been totally worth it? Maybe it was expensive. Maybe it took you a long time to learn it. Maybe you had to stop other things in order to start this thing. Maybe you had to go through a lot of pain to get there. Whatever it was, you were willing to do it, because it was valuable to you. You paid the price and it was worth every effort.

Paul is talking about the results of his ministry to the Thessalonians. In vs.13, Paul says that he knows the fledgling church has taken the teaching of Paul as the true word of God to them. He says that he knows that God's word is at work in them. And in vs.14 he tells them why. He says that they are continuing the pattern – *For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea.* And he says that the proof is their perseverance in persecution – *For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews.*

This reminds us of what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 1:6 – *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.* And you need to know that although Paul is talking specifically about suffering persecution here, this applies to all of our suffering. To suffer well is proof of your belief. And this grace under fire is a living word to people of what and how much Jesus Christ means to you.

Suffering is the pattern of proof. And this is how the word of the gospel is spread. 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8 – *so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.* That's the word of God at work, a true testimony to God's worth.

Some people teach that all Christians are supposed to be successful, in every area of life. That faith means you don't have to suffer, and that if you suffer, it's your fault. Now, sometimes it is your fault that you suffer. But not all suffering is because you lack faith. Rather, it can be a demonstration of faith.

1 Peter 2:19-21 – *For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. Following Jesus means learning to suffer well, for doing well.*

When you live for the true Jesus in truth, you will suffer in some ways. However, when you suffer as a believer, and yet you persevere and still proclaim the name of Jesus, his greatness and his goodness, you become a powerful witness to the worth of Christ.

There is a cost to being a Christian. Salvation is free, but growing as a disciple requires discipline. Grace is opposed to merit, but it is not opposed to effort. Grace inspires effort. Grace empowers effort. And Jesus is worth it. Not just for eternal life, but for this life. 1 Timothy 4:7-8 says – *train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*

We may have a tendency to think that we are doing something wrong, when what we think is right isn't happening to us. Our relationships aren't improving, our finances are messed up, our emotional life is disturbed, our health is declining, and so forth. We aren't getting better. Things are getting worse. We must be doing it wrong. The word of God isn't working in us. Or you think that you might as well just give up, and settle for mediocrity, because that is just your destiny. And you fall into complacency, inaction, and indifference. You think, why bother? And you are content to just indulge your own passions while your passion for God fades away.

True, godly contentment isn't the same thing. True, godly contentment doesn't mean you're just supposed to lower your expectations. It doesn't mean that you can't achieve, you can't advance, and it's wrong to try. It doesn't mean that as a Christian, you should expect nothing but headache and heartache in your life. It doesn't mean that your only hope is in Heaven.

Rather, it means you accept that difficulty, pain, and problems are part of your life, and part of God's plan. And you know that God's purpose is to use them to teach you, make your faith stronger, and deepen your dependence and trust. Contentment knows that God is at work, and it is intent on working with him. True contentment is on fire! Because you know that knowing God is everything. And you can know him in anything.

Part of maturing is to realize that God is always at work. That all things are shaping you into the image of Christ, for your good and God's glory. Paul was telling them that yes, you are suffering, but this is the pattern. This is God's purpose. This will display God's power! You are growing, and the word is at work in you. God's word at work in you is not always about finding that exact thing that speaks to you about your current felt needs. It's not about getting you out of every situation. It's about glorifying God in every situation. It's not mainly about what you think is important to you, but what you know is important to God.

You don't have to go looking to suffer, it will just come at some points and in some ways. It may not be personal persecution. It may take other forms of "attack." And the call to suffer well is not a call to invite suffering needlessly. For example, you can't provoke someone with hateful, hostile, condescending, combative speech, devoid of any grace, and then, when they respond in kind, legitimately call that "persecution." 1 Peter 3:15-17 – *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.*

There are a lot of ways that you can respond to the difficulties in your life. You can get mad, and project your anger onto others. You can get sad, and withdraw from others. You can get bad, and stop living for God. Or you can get glad, believing that God has purposed for you to know him through this suffering, and that he has given you a platform to give him glory.

Tim Challies tells the story of a friend who was told he had only a short time left to live. This man made it his purpose to give his last days to calling his Christian friends to encourage them in their faith one last time and to calling his non-Christian friends to tell them about Jesus one last time. "After all," he said, "everyone will listen to a dying man." His suffering gave him a platform and he used it to proclaim the glories of God.

You may feel like you can't get out of the hole you're in. You might be in chaos, and catastrophe, and confused. But even in all that you can still be confident in God's purpose. And you can use this awful situation to proclaim the awesomeness of God. Yes, people will think you are nuts. But you can be crazy for Jesus! None of the problems of this life or this world can change the person, the power, the promise, or the providence of God. In all the darkness, you can be a blazing fire, a witness to the worth of God.

Yes, we are all full of emotions, and those emotions wane and waver and wonder about God and his providence. Our faith seems to lessen at times. We can't even imagine how this suffering has a purpose. But it does. And even when you don't understand what God does, you can rejoice in who God is, and rest in what God has done for you in Jesus Christ.

Yes, we all fail. And we fail to be faithful at times. But God has not failed in his mission, and he will not fail to deliver you. But along the journey, you'll discover that deliverance might look a little different than you think. But when everyone else expects you to be mad, sad, or bad, and you instead get glad about Jesus, you are witnessing to the worth of God.

Yes, we have grief, and it is right to grieve. And you aren't supposed to desire suffering. But God's providence gives you a platform, whether it is from the top of the mountain, or the bottom of the valley, in front of the masses, or in front of the mirror. You show the light of Christ to the unbelieving world. And you encourage and inspire other believers. And yourself. God has invested eternity in you. And in all things, your call as a Christian is to live like the cost is worth it. Because Jesus always is.