

1st Thessalonians 2: 14-16; “The Imitation of Suffering”, Sermon
11 in the series – “A Persevering Faith”, Delivered by
Pastor Paul Rendall on August 6th, 2017,
in the Morning Worship Service.

Verse 13 sets the stage for verses 14-16 of this passage. When a person receives the Word of God, not as the word of men, but for what it really is; the Word of God, then persecution in some form or another will come to him. Paul says in 2nd Timothy 3: 12, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” Do you desire to live godly in Christ Jesus? Then the experience of being rejected, and the persecution that comes to you because of your faith in Jesus Christ, is part of God’s holy and wise plan for you. I know that this is something that is shocking to hear, and I do not want anyone here to think that God is cruel to His people by the way that I am speaking, for God is compassionate and merciful and full of love for all of His dear children. But suffering for Christ is a part of the Christian life. 2nd Timothy 2: 11 says, “If we died with Him, we shall also live with Him.” “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him.” The NAS reads, “If we suffer with Him we shall also reign with Him.”

Most Christian people that I know, including myself, are unused to suffering for Christ, and they have experienced very little persecution in their life. It truly is a strange thing to someone who lives in this society. The Christian may think, at first, that they are being persecuted because there is something wrong with them; that there is something legitimate in the terrible things that are said about them. Therefore, they begin to think that they deserve this kind of treatment. But when a Christian reads the words of their Lord in the Bible; that in the World you are to expect tribulation, and then you behold the experience of many others who have taken their stand for Christ and who have been persecuted; then you know that God cannot be wrong in this matter. God has led you into this experience, and God will sustain and lead you through it as well. It is all a part of what God has granted to you. Philippians 1: 29 – “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake. By grace, and because of grace, you will see that it is important for you to become an imitator of others who you know, or who you have heard about, who have suffered for Christ.

The question of this morning is: How does the Christian respond to suffering for Christ’s sake? In this sermon I do not want to focus primarily on the persecutors themselves, and their sin, and the condemnation which will surely come to them if they do not repent. Instead I want to focus on how the Christian, who has never really received much persecution, might learn to suffer more for Christ and the gospel. If we focus on the persecutors, it might make us angry at them. Perhaps it will be righteous anger. But there might sinful anger mixed up with it as well. It might make us less willing to suffer for Christ’s sake. But if you focus on the example of those dear Christians who have gone before you, you may indeed become stronger in your witness, and glorify God when it comes your time to suffer for righteousness. In this hour we want to look at godly imitation as a means to learning to endure suffering for Christ. We want to look 1st – At the church at Thessalonica’s imitation of other churches. We will look 2nd – At their imitation of Christ and the prophets. And 3rd – We will look at their imitation of the Apostle Paul. Let us pray, as we study this, that we will become by God’s grace, imitators of those faithful Christians who have gone before us.

1st of all - The imitation of other churches. (verse 14)

“For you brethren became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus.” The churches of Judea had gone before the church of Thessalonica in suffering for the sake of the gospel. The word “churches” is a word which means assemblies or gatherings of people, but it is not restricted in its usage to Christian churches. Leon Morris, in his commentary says, “The word rendered ‘church’, namely ekklesia, is not a specifically religious word.” “It could be used of such

assemblies as that of the rioting Ephesians in Asia.” (Acts 19: 41) “It is true that it is sometimes is used in the Septuagint of the assembly of Israel, but that assembly was just as much political as religious.” “But we can see how clearly Paul wanted to distinguish the assemblies of Christ’s churches from the many other political and religious assemblies of that day.” “He calls them ‘the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus.’”

Paul is distinguishing these Christian assemblies from the unbelieving Jewish assemblies. The persecution which came to these early churches was often initiated by those overly zealous leaders of synagogues, or others, who were trying desperately to promote the law as standing apart and away from anything related to Jesus Christ. The gospel to these zealots was “be circumcised and be saved”. They promoted themselves and what they had, in terms of their privileges and their works, rather than Christ. A good example of this is found in Philippians 3: 2 if you will turn there with me. The issue with many of these zealous persecuting Jews was establishing as “truth” whether salvation was ceremonial and sacramental, or not. To them it was a matter of establishing their own Jewish privileges, and their own outward righteousness. Paul has harsh words to describe them. Listen to verse 2: “Beware of dogs, beware of the mutilation!” “For we are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh.” “If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

This was the church, the assembly which Paul was a part of, before he was converted to Christ. A persecuting mindset ran strong through these false churches and assemblies in Judea. Their zeal for their national religion led them to persecute all those who followed Jesus, because His gospel was a gospel which said that they must believe in Him; His words and sayings. They must believe that they were great enough sinners that Jesus had to obey God’s law perfectly in their place, and suffer and die to pay for their sins at the cross. And they thought that this idea was repugnant. They could no longer boast in their own accomplishments and privileges, but rather they had to believe in a man who said He was the Son of God? It was said that He had to suffer and die for them? It was said by Jesus Himself that “unless they ate His flesh and drank His blood that they would have no life in themselves.” No, they would not submit to this different way of attaining righteousness.

Let us understand that the battle for truth upon the earth is always a spiritual battle between churches; churches battling with the falsehoods put forth by false churches. The false churches will do battle not only with their strong assertions of what they believe to be true, which is not; but they will also battle using the carnal weapons of persecution. But the true Church conquers by means of suffering for the truth, not by persecuting and killing others to have it established. Our Lord Jesus calls these false churches who persecuted His true churches in that day, “the Synagogues of Satan”.

I would like you to turn over to that passage with me. It is Revelation 3: 8. Jesus says, speaking to the true church in Philadelphia, “I know your works.” “See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.” “Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie – indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.” “Because you have kept My command to persevere....” I want you to see from this that Christians are those who engage in good works. If they are faithful, they will keep God’s word and they will not deny the name of Jesus. This is what they persevere in. God opens doors for the gospel. Men who are of the synagogue of Satan will try to keep the door closed but they will not be able to.

In the verses just before this, Jesus speaks of Himself and He describes Himself in this way: “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.” Christians trust in God’s good providence when they suffer for His sake, and they come to

understand through persecution, in many cases, that God causes all things to work together for good, not only for individual elect believers, but also for whole churches of His believers. When one church suffers for the sake of Christ, they are suffering together, for gospel. A door has been opened, but there are many adversaries. But the truth of Christ continues to spread and will prevail against all odds. Let me ask you if there is within your heart and mind a basic willingness to suffer for Christ's sake? The commentator William Hendricksen says: "Willingness to suffer for Christ is proof of discipleship." "It shows that the word of God is at work in the heart." "It unites believers, so that they constitute a true brotherhood." "For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of Judea."

Now 2nd – Let's look at their imitation of Christ and His prophets.

(Verse 14b and 15a)

"For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets..." I think that it is always a very good way to approach the idea of our suffering for Christ by thinking back to the words of our Lord Himself about the subject. When we suffer for His sake we are only continuing and extending the ministry of the Lord Jesus' sufferings. When the Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, what did the Lord say to him that would show us that those who believe in Him continue His ministry of suffering for truth and righteousness? The Lord said to Paul when he asked him who He was; "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Was Paul ever given the opportunity to persecute the Lord Jesus in the days of His earthly ministry? No, but in persecuting His saints, Paul was persecuting Christ. Let us always remember this. When we are granted the privilege of suffering for His name's sake we have taken a further step up in our becoming Christ like. We are imitating Christ in his sufferings by suffering for the same cause; the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness. This is something to rejoice in.

Look at Matthew 5: 10 with me, and you will see this. Jesus says here, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake." "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecute the prophets who were before you." William Hendricksen in his commentary at this place says, "Whether the persecution comes from the Jews or the Gentiles, it is ever the same in character, because at bottom it is the age-old warfare of the devil against the "the Christ, the woman, and the rest of her seed." Turn over to John 15, verse 18 and you will see this. Here Jesus telling his disciples what will surely happen to them as a result of their faith in Him, and their identification with Him, in His cause of righteousness and truth. Verse 18 says, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you." "If you were of the world, the world would love its own." "Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.'" "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." "If they kept My word, they will keep yours also."

You can see from this that truly we as Christ's churches are His body. The body is the servant to the head. And so, when we are persecuted it is because those who are persecuting us, are doing so because they would persecute our Lord Jesus directly if He were here present to receive their abuse. A sinful rebellious heart hates the thought of needing Christ as Savior and submitting to Him as Lord. But a heart that loves the Lord Jesus and wants to serve Him and bear spiritual fruit unto Him realizes that persecution and suffering are the way to grow up into Christ. Look with me at 1st Peter 4: 12. "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad, with exceeding joy." "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." "On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified." To us now, suffering for Christ seems like such a desperately difficult and unpleasant business that we would rather be lukewarm than be zealous at this point.

But listen to the words of Corrie Ten Boom. “Several years ago I was in Africa in a nation where a new government had come into power.” “The first night I was there some of the Christians were commanded to come to the police station to register.” When they arrived they were arrested and that same night they were executed.” “The next day the same thing happened with other Christians.” “The third day it was the same.” “All the Christians in the district were being systematically murdered.” “The fourth day I was to speak in a little church.” “The people came, but they were filled with fear and tension.” “All during the service they were looking at each other, their eyes asking, ‘Will this one I am sitting beside be the next one killed?’ “Will I be the next one?” “The room was hot and stuffy with insects that came through the screenless windows and swirled around the naked bulbs over the bare wooden benches.” “I told them a story out of my childhood.” “When I was a little girl,” I said, “I went to my father and said, ‘Daddy, I am afraid that I will never be strong enough to be a martyr for Jesus Christ.’ “Tell me, said Father, “When you take a train trip to Amsterdam, when do I give you the money for the ticket?” “Three weeks before?” “No, Daddy, you give me the money for the ticket just before we get on the train.” “That is right,” my father said, “and so it is with God’s strength.” “Our Father in Heaven knows when you will need the strength to be a martyr for Jesus Christ.” “He will supply all you need – just in time.”

“My African friends were nodding and smiling.” “Suddenly a spirit of joy descended upon that church and the people began singing, “In the sweet, by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.” “Later that week, half the congregation of that church was executed.” “I heard later that the other half was killed some months ago.” “But I must tell you something.” “I was so happy that the Lord used me to encourage these people, for unlike many of their leaders, I had the word of God.” “I had been to the Bible and discovered that Jesus said He had not only overcome the world, but to all those who remained faithful to the end, He would give a crown of life.” (end of quote) I would say about what Corrie said: Truly this is the way that our God and our Lord Jesus Christ lead their dear children along. He will give them grace to suffer when they truly need it. He will uphold them in their faith so that they will persevere unto the end.

Then 3rd – Let’s look at the church in Thessalonica’s imitation of the Apostle Paul
(Verses 15b and 16a)

“...and they have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins...” When Saul was converted and commissioned to be an Apostle, the Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision and told him something very important about what it means to be a Christian. Ananias had protested going to Paul to help him because he had heard about the fact that Paul had done so much harm to God’s saints in Jerusalem. But the Lord said to him, “Go for he is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.” “For I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” Paul really did suffer many things at the hands of men during much of his ministry of the gospel. He thought of it as good teaching for the various churches that he ministered to.

You can see how he thinks about it if you will turn to Colossians 1: 24. “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.” “To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul wanted very much for the church at Colosse and all the churches that he ministered to, to understand the glory of the mystery of Christ in them. It was not just Christ in him, but it was Christ in them that gave him this strength to endure hardships and sufferings and persecutions. Paul tried to show them that his sufferings were “filling up in his flesh what was lacking in Christ’s sufferings”.

We must ask ourselves: Was there anything lacking in Christ's sufferings?" No, not as far as the atonement is concerned. His sufferings are a finished and complete work. No man, not even an Apostle can add to it. Then what is he talking about here? He is speaking of ministering to Christ's body the church, in his own day and time. He, in his sufferings, was enduring what Christ would endure for these believers were He upon the earth at that time. He was living out Christ in his ministry to other believers. He was saying to them, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ". And they did this very thing. Ask yourself if this is your desire? Is this what you are willing to do, to lay down your life for other believers? Are you willing to "fill up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings" in relation to other believers? Listen to Paul in 2nd Timothy 3: 10 and following. "But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra – what persecutions I endured." "And out of them all the Lord delivered me." This is what he said just shortly before he was martyred for the faith. There he was, boasting in His God who had brought him through all that, and he would now culminate his ministry with his dying for Christ. He knew that "to live is Christ and to die was gain." This is something that I pray will be a truth that each of us will also will learn if God will grant it to us.