

1st Thessalonians 2: 14-16 “To Fill up the Measure”, Sermon # 12
in the series – “A Persevering Faith”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on August 13th, 2017, in the Morning Worship Service.

In preaching to you from these verses in my last message, I said to you that I did not want to focus primarily on the persecutors of Christians; who, if they do not repent will come into everlasting condemnation. I wanted our focus to be primarily on the persecuted Christian; the one who becomes an imitator of other Christians who have gone before him in this matter. I tried to show you that younger believers and those who are encountering persecution for the first time, should not think it a strange thing but rather they should learn to imitate the strong faith of other persecuted Christians who have gone before them. The Thessalonian believers imitated the churches of Judea who had been persecuted. They also imitated Christ and the prophets who were persecuted before them. And further, they imitated the Apostle Paul and Silas who had suffered persecution in bringing the gospel to them. And so, you and I have the example of all of these which have gone before us, which we can imitate.

The truth that we want to look at here this morning is that God’s foreknowledge and His predestinating plans not only deal with His dear children who he guides through this life and brings safely to His heavenly kingdom; but they also extend to those evil and wicked persons who persevere in their sins in bringing persecution against those who are proclaiming the gospel. This is what verse 16 is speaking of. It is talking about the Gentile leaders and people in Thessalonica continuing in their sins of persecution, which was the same kind of response which the Jews gave to the Lord Jesus Christ and those messengers and servants who first brought the gospel to those in Judea. Whereas the Christians in Thessalonica were imitators of good, these persons that he is speaking of were imitators of evil and evil men. And so what I would have you to consider this morning is the sovereignty of God in relation to the sins of wicked men, men who oppose and persecute the messengers of the gospel.

What is God’s attitude, and what is God’s righteous and holy response to this? We are told here that God’s response is to allow them to “fill up the measure of their sins”. And when God perceives that they have filled up the measure of their sins, then in His wrath, justly determines to punish them for all the wicked deeds that they have done. He begins by punishing them in this life, and then He continues and increases it in the next. So to open up this truth I want to speak to you now 1st – About the sins that provoke God’s measurement of them. And then 2nd – We will look at what the measurement of their sins means. And then 3rd – We will look at the measurement of God’s wrath in proportion to these sins.

Let’s think 1st of all – About the sins that provoke God’s measurement of them.

These sins are listed for us here in our verses. In verse 14b it says – “For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God.” We have been learning that to suffer for Christ is indeed a privilege which God grants to us. When we experience opposition, being spoken against and being persecuted, we suffer “according to the will of God”, it says in 1st Peter 4: 19. It is He who sovereignly orders all things in our lives. If we suffer we are called to it as a part of the holy and wise plan of God for our lives. It is one of the ways that He can be mightily glorified in us. Having presented those aspects of truth to you in my last sermon, I am now prepared to turn our attention to God’s attitude and response to those who persecuted these Thessalonian believers. We need to understand that when we come to such a subject that these are not easy things to understand, but we need to try to understand them as best we can from God’s perspective, and not our own.

For instance; we heard a few years ago about the persecution and killing that took place in Turkey, of those faithful and brave Christians, Necati Aydin and the other two men who were with

him. These men were only trying to conduct a Bible Study and bring the good news of the gospel to those who were being deceived by the false Muslim religion, and they were slaughtered in a most brutal manner. We may find ourselves asking: Why did God permit it? Could not God have prevented this terrible slaughter? We must believe that certainly God could have prevented it. We do believe in the sovereignty of God over all people and all events, and we should not believe for one moment that God could not have prevented these wicked men from doing this. But we could just as easily ask the same question about the fall of man in the beginning of the world. Could not God have prevented the entrance of sin into the world? Could He not have intervened before Adam took his first bite of the forbidden fruit? Most certainly He could have, but God had holy and wise reasons for permitting the Fall of Man, and we should understand that there were at least two reasons that God both ordained and permitted it. First, to test and prove the truth about Adam, the first man; that even though God had given free will to Adam, still He knew that Adam would not be able to pass the test and keep himself from the evil, and stand in his own original righteousness, but he would indeed fall. God saw that this needed to be shown and proved to all men. It was and is a very necessary thing for us to understand; that man ever since Adam's fall, cannot keep the good commandments that He has given to them, and even when man was upright and had freedom of will, he was not able to do it.

And then, second, God would have all men to be dependent upon Him for all of their wisdom and righteousness and spiritual strength. God saw fit to permit the fall of man for His own glory, to show forth His purpose; to sum up all things in His own dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. It says in Acts 2: 23 it says, "Him, (that is Jesus Christ), being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you (that is the Jewish leaders of that day and the people who went along with them) have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put Him to death...." We can see from this that not only did God permit this suffering of the Lord Jesus for our sakes, but He ordained it as part of His Pre-determined plan, in accordance with His foreknowledge. One of the main reasons that He did this was so that every Christian would come to understand, as it says in Isaiah 45, verse 24 – "Only in the Lord are righteousness and strength."

I am trying to say to you this morning that it is the same for every Christian who is privileged to suffer for their Savior. In suffering for Christ you come to understand His special strength of grace, which He gives to you during times when you are misrepresented and spoken against. You are taught the Lord's way of forwarding His kingdom in righteousness and truth. And through these providential orderings which lead you into suffering for Christ's sake, the Father brings you, His child, into greater conformity to image of His dear Son. But looking at the death of Christ from the standpoint of the wicked men that perpetrated the crime; it was "the hands of wicked men" that persecuted and put the Lord Jesus to death. They were fully responsible for the evil that they committed. God is not the author of any evil; nor can He, nor does He, approve of it. He does have plans to deal with such men, who perpetrate evil, by judging them if they do not repent, knowing that all they would do in their wickedness He will punish as a righteous judge. So, these are the sins which provoke God's measuring them, and they are the sins that are related to the persecution of God's dear people. They are the sins of violence and force against their persons because they preached Jesus. The people that do so are described as being "not pleasing to God". They do not want to believe the gospel that they are sinners who need to be saved. They are Christ rejecting, violent people. And they are further described here as "contrary to all men".

They are described as "their own countrymen" in verse 14. They were the Jews of the synagogue that Paul first preached to, when he and Silas and Timothy came to Thessalonica. You can get a taste of what these Jews were like if you will turn over to Acts 17 with me. In verse 1 it says, "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews." "Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to reason with them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." "And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of

the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.” “But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.” “But when they did not find them they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”

So you see that it was the sin of envy that aroused these Jews. They didn't like the idea of Paul and Silas being so popular with the people and preaching to them in such a way that they would no longer simply be Jewish or proselytes of Judaism. They didn't like Paul and Silas preaching that Jesus, not circumcision, was the truth of how to be saved from sins and to be made right with God. They did not like the idea of the gospel coming to the Gentiles either. In fact our text in Thessalonians says this very thing: “...forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins”. They did not want to search the Scriptures to find out whether these things were so. They were simply interested in preserving and protecting their own Jewish religion. They were not interested in finding out whether Jesus was the Christ, whether He was indeed raised from the dead, whether God Himself was the author of this gospel and responsible for raising these men up to preach to them the gospel which was the fulfillment of all of their Old Testament Scriptures about the Christ. They simply wanted their Jewish religion to continue. This kind of envy would turn to persecution in the strategy that they took. With their words they would try to get them to be seen as troublemakers in the eyes of the political authorities.

They say in verse 7, “Jason has harbored them”, as though they were criminals. They go on to say: “And these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king – Jesus.” “And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things.” “So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.” “Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.” “When they arrived they went in to the synagogue of the Jews.” They preached to them there and found them more “noble-minded” than those in Thessalonica because they examined the Scriptures to find out whether these things that Paul preached to them were so. “Therefore,” verse 12 says, “many of the them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.” But look now, at how deep-seated the enmity and hatred of the Jews at Thessalonica was for Paul and the Jesus that he preached. Even though Paul and Silas have gone away from Thessalonica to Berea, verse 13 says – “But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds.”

You see, these were the kinds of sins which provoked God to measure their sins. They not only would not believe the gospel themselves, but they were laboring and taking pains to see to it that no one else would believe it either. This was this same persecuting spirit that moved in the Pharisees and the Sadducees to put the Lord Jesus to death. The greatest persecutors of Christ's church have always been those men who were most religious but they would not believe that they had to have Jesus to be saved. They would not submit to the Lord Jesus as King over their life under any circumstances. These sins, I say, were measured by God. And, we must conclude that they are not only measured in these religious unbelievers then, but they are, even today, measured in all unbelievers of all backgrounds whatsoever. God is always watching, and he is always very minutely noting, how wicked people are treating His own children. God notes and measures. Their sins are remembered in all their particulars. God remembers them in respect to each person and every group of persons who persecutes. And having noted all of these things, He then selects the appropriate way to pay them back for their sins.

It is true that God did choose to save one who was a great persecutor of God's people. I am thinking of the Apostle Paul himself. But there were many more who would step in, to fill his place, once he turned traitor to their cause. Not all, nor even many, of those who persecute and kill God's people are ever shown mercy or given grace to turn away from such sins. Instead God sets a limit

for their sins; a certain measure which they will attain, and then in His perfect time, in perfect wisdom and justice, His judgments begin to fall upon them. They become monuments to His everlasting justice.

2nd – This leads to the question: What does it mean when it says – “to fill up the measure of their sins”? (verse 16)

To fill up the measure of one's sins is like an hour glass. The hour glass, as you know has upper and lower bulbs of glass, and these two bulbs are joined by a narrow neck of glass. Once the hour glass is turned over, the sands begin to flow down from the upper into the lower part of the glass at a certain and definite pace determined by the neck's width. There is only a certain amount of time that can transpire until all the grains of sand run out of the top part of the glass and fill up the bottom part of the glass. In a very sure and steady way, the sands pass through the neck from the upper bulb of glass to the lower. The progress may seem to be slow but it is going much quicker than you think. But the measurement and the time for the sand running out is fixed. There are only a certain number of grains of sand in the hourglass. Even so, God measures the sins of persecuting unbelievers. He gives these sinners a certain time where they will do what they will in their sin. The number of sins and the amount of the iniquity that they can perpetrate is very precisely measured, and then God's judgments against them will most certainly begin. These judgments often begin with temporal judgments which affect the unbeliever's peace, his estate, his family, his business, and his society. They end with his death, his permanent separation from the goodness of God, and his being cast into hell.

The only thing that will prevent these judgments of God from falling upon the persecuting unbeliever, and indeed any unbeliever, is their coming to saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Looking at this from the human perspective, when sins are committed by unbelievers against God's people, because they are Christians, each sin is another grain closer in the hour-glass to the appointed hour in which the hour-glass will be filled up, and God will deal decisively with them. Let me show you a good scripture in relation to this. Genesis 15: 13-16 gives us a good indication that purposes of God are focused upon nations as well as individuals in terms of their guilt and in terms of His punishing them with temporal and eternal judgments. God is addressing Abraham in a vision in a dream in the night. It is a dream that brings terror to Abraham because God tells him that descendants would be, “strangers in a land that was not theirs, and they would serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.” This is when Israel became slaves in Egypt after Joseph died. But now listen to what God goes on to tell Abraham: “Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.” “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

The reason that the descendants of Abraham would not be set free and come back into the promised land before the fourth generation was because there was a certain and definite measure to the iniquity which God in His patience knew would be committed by them, which had to be filled up according to His justice, before He would judge them and cast them out of the land. But having measured it, at that very time He would bring it. The measure of what sins they could engage in would be up, and God would deal with them. It would be their judgment day as a nation upon this earth, and many from their nation would be turned into hell when they died physically. When they died physically, they perished eternally, and they would be punished eternally. What is the application that I would give to you? It is this: To those of you who have never savingly put your trust in the Lord Jesus; you must realize that each and every sin that you commit is being recorded in relation to the hour glass of time that God has allotted to you here upon the earth. Will you fill up the measure of your sins, or will you repent? The Holy Spirit strives with you in common grace in your being able to hear the preaching of the word. Maybe you have heard the gospel many times, for many years. But you should understand that time is running out. Do not let matters of God's justice escape you. Have dealings with God today. Pray to Him, confessing your sins, and pray to Him in the name of Jesus, for He will hear your cries for forgiveness if you come to Him in the name of Jesus. If you do seek God in prayer, if you do see your need of Christ and believe in

Him, today will be the day of salvation for you, if you do so. Do not wait, for it may be too late if you do.

Now 3rd – Let’s look for a few minutes at the Measurement of God’s Wrath in relation to these sins.

Our verses say that the Jews that persecuted Paul and Silas “forbade them from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.” This is also confirmed to be the truth if you will turn over with me to Matthew 23: 27. Jesus had endured much opposition to His person and His teaching from the Scribes and Pharisees during the course of His earthly ministry. And now that He was nearing the end of His earthly ministry, He knew that it would be right for Him to speak to the multitudes and to His disciples to warn them against the hypocrisy, and the hatred and the violence concealed under their long robes; their many hypocrisies in religious works and words. He says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” “For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.” “Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” “Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’” “Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.” “Fill up then, the measure of your father’s guilt.”

You see, here Jesus is here addressing not just individual Pharisees and scribes. He is addressing them as a group. He is not just addressing the groups of these men before him at that time, but the many generations of Jews who persecuted their own prophets who had spoken to them about their sins and their need of the grace of the Messiah who was coming. It is true that here and there, there may have been some believers among them, but in general they had rejected Christ and His teaching of their need of a new heart and a righteousness better than an outward one. What these men who stood before Him were guilty of, was “filling up the measure” of their father’s sins. There would be a very definite temporal judgment which would be coming upon them because of this. It would be the destruction of their nation in 70 A.D. by the Romans. They would be scattered to all the nations of the world and be spiritually desolate.

Over one million, one hundred thousand people died in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. And not only did they lose their physical lives, but probably a good many of them died and went to hell. “Wrath had already come upon them to the uttermost”, even before 70 A.D. The hardening of their hearts to the gospel, and God’s hardening their hearts further in accordance with their sins of unbelief, was the demonstration that they were already reserved for judgment. If we were to look in the book of God’s decrees we would see that they were appointed to this doom by God, not arbitrarily in His sovereignty, but justly because of their sins and because He is a God of justice. It was their own sins that brought them to that place. It was not God’s fault. He had striven with them through many prophets, apostles, preachers and teachers, preaching the gospel to them and continuing to do so under their persecutions. Their judgment was just.

And so I would like to end this sermon by asking each of us to apply this truth that we are studying to ourselves. Where are you my friend, in relation to the measure of your sins being filled up? This is a very scary thought. But if you will believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ that I preach to you today, this measurement by God will cease altogether in relation to you. You will no longer be a child of wrath but a child of God. Christ has born the punishment due to all and every one of your sins, when you believe in Him. The hour glass of God’s goodness and mercy will never run out. Christ died for you so that you will not continue in sin. And if you do sin, it says in 1st John 2: 1, “you have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.” If you believe in Jesus, you will come to know that the wrath of God came upon Him to the uttermost at the cross, for your sake. Can His love for us be measured? I think that you know the answer to that. He is

able to save to the uttermost, those who come to God through Him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them.