

ENDURING SUFFERING – A SIGN WE ARE CHRIST’S

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

We have seen from earlier in this chapter that Paul was able to commend the people he was writing to because he had seen certain things in them. It was an encouragement to them to know that their love, faith and patience was recognised by an apostle as being hallmarks of genuine belonging to Christ. Paul develops that further here and notes that the censure that these believers received, including the persecution that experienced, revealed that they belonged to Christ and would be vindicated, while their enemies would perish.

This is an encouragement to these believers, and to us, that we should not give up. We are on the right side of His righteous judgment which will, one day, be manifest on the Day of Judgment. There being persecuted, and bearing up under it, are encouraging signs that they belong to Christ, and will be owned by Him on that Day.

1. Injustices are not forgotten.

Everywhere in this passage is the awareness of what these believers are experiencing. It talks of persecutions and tribulations (v4), the things they suffer (v5) and trouble (v6). They are being attacked because they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But these things are a sign that the Lord will uphold His people and will punish those who trouble them (v9).

We have a bad habit of forgetting or ignoring injustices. We forget the wrongs that have been done to people. God does not forget. Sometimes those wrongs have been committed by people who would identify themselves as Christians. At other times they are done by non-Christians. This latter group is spoken of in v8 where it talks of those who do not know God and reject the gospel, speaking here about one and the same group of people. Christians are lied against, have the weight of the law used against them, are the victims of invented ‘hate crimes’, and, more seriously, are imprisoned and physically threatened and hurt.

Much of this is done in the name of Islam. There are always difficulties where Islamic people have a radical, ‘back-to-the-Qur’an’ approach to their faith. In lots of parts of the world, Islam is the threat to Christians. Notable at the moment are Afghanistan and parts of West Africa where horrific crimes against believers are taking place. Converts to

Christianity from Islam are harassed in Iran and a host of countries. Blasphemy laws are weaponised against Christians in Pakistan on a regular basis.

Communism too, with its fiercely antagonistic stance to religion and its violently Utopian outlook, has been notorious in its persecution of true believers. Its practitioners are not restrained by the ethics of Christianity and believe that religion is opposed to the reaching of the 'better world' they feel mandated and obligated to create. China and North Korea stand out as examples of this but, before them, the countries of the Soviet bloc, were fanatical in their anti-Christian zeal. In other parts of the world, Christians are seen as enemies by tribal or other forms of ethnic sectarianism.

The actions of these evil-doers are not forgotten by the Lord. The existence of these people and the long-suffering of the church is an evidence that the Lord makes a distinction among them, and will judge the ungodly.

The Lord's people are especially singled out for this treatment because evil-doers know in their consciences that the truth is with the people of the Christian faith, but their troubled consciences are over-ridden, leading to a violent and irrational reaction. It is also proof of the cowardice of many of those who persecute because they know that Christians will not fight back, and so are an easy target.

We are not to be discouraged at the apparent victories of bigoted opponents. Our capacity to absorb injustices and persevere is an indication of the distinction that the Lord make, giving power and grace to His people to endure, while reserving those who oppose for flaming fire. He will take perfect vengeance because He has a record of all the wrongs that are done, the attacks that are made against Christians and all the evidence that unbelievers ignore.

2. We have eternity in view.

We suffer for a kingdom (v5). We suffer for the King of that kingdom. Our sufferings are not in vain or just an empty piece of martyrdom. We believe in the justice and judgment of God, that He repays evil-doers (v6) that He will take vengeance (v8) and inflict punishment (v9). We believe in a day that the One who is despised by the ungodly will be glorified and admired by His people (v10).

In coming to Christ, we felt the weight of His displeasure against sin, and fled to the Lord for refuge. We knew that flaming fire and everlasting destruction awaited us. God is not indifferent to our sufferings or forgetful of the losses we endure. He will give His people rest (v7), deliverance, peace and safety.

The existence of hell is a sign that God cares very much about His dignity and His honour. He cares very much about the things said and done against His people, for they are said and done against Him. Injustices committed against the Lord's people count

very much in the sight of the Lord. So those who disobey Him will be shut out of His gracious presence. They will be without hope, comfort and any prospect of the Lord's friendship. They are not able to benefit from seeing the glory of His power. There is nothing to cheer them or preserve them.

His keeping power is, however, confirmed in us. On the day of His return, we will see Him, admire Him, and will be so pleased with Him, and all that we see in Him and hear from Him. He will be beautiful to our gaze so that our hearts will well up and our eyes will be filled with tears of wonder and joy. We will have the exquisite delight of knowing that this is our prospect for all eternity.

So, while we suffer now, we know that our thinking has to be long-term. We have our eyes set on eternity.