

Sermon: 2 Thessalonians 1

I want to start by asking you a question: How can God be just when there are millions of Christians around the world who are being persecuted for their faith? How is it right that people who know and love the Lord Jesus are suffering terribly?

And, let's be clear, there are millions of Christians around the world who are facing terrible persecution. Just in the last two months, 300 Christians from one diocese in Nigeria have been killed. In Syria many Christians have been kidnapped, murdered, homes have been ransacked. In Iran, Christians have been rounded up by the authorities and arrested and are being intimidated and harassed. These are just three examples; there are Christians all over the world facing persecution for their faith every day.

How can God allow this, why doesn't he do something? The writer of Psalm 94 was asking this very question when he wrote:

How long will the wicked, O Lord,
how long will the wicked be jubilant?

⁴They pour out arrogant words;
all the evildoers are full of boasting.

⁵They crush your people, O Lord;
they oppress your inheritance.

⁶They slay the widow and the alien;
they murder the fatherless.

⁷They say, "The Lord does not see;
the God of Jacob pays no heed."

I'm sure these questions were not far from the minds of the Thessalonian church. The church in Thessalonica had been established not long before this letter was written, which you can read about in Acts 17. In that chapter we find that after three weeks of preaching there, Paul and Silas were forced to leave because the city drove them out. The persecution they were facing had not stopped; in fact we read in verse 4 they are enduring 'persecutions and trials', v5 'suffering', v6 'troubles'.

I'm sure that the situation of the Thessalonian church was not too different from the situation many churches are facing today: mistreatment, oppression, even torture.

Now at this point you might think, "That's all very well. So a lot of churches are facing persecution today. How's that relevant to us?"

Well this brings us to our first heading: That we will be persecuted for our faith.

We will be persecuted for our faith (v4)

One of the things that the Bible says about persecution is that we should expect it. Persecution is not just something which happens to churches "over there", it happens to every Christian to some extent.

In John 15:20, Jesus said “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” He warns us to expect persecution – in the same way that the world did not understand Christ and persecuted him, we will be misunderstood and persecuted.

In Acts 14:22, Paul and Barnabas said “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”. Similarly, Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12 “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”. It is absolutely clear from the pages of scripture that being a Christian involves some level of persecution!

But what does that actually look like – particularly in the UK, where we are in no danger of being bombed, or of armed police bursting through the doors and taking us all off to prison?

I believe one example of the way the church is persecuted in this country is the increasing marginalisation of Christianity within it. The government particularly seem to be leading the way in taking the country further and further away from the Christian principles we have seen in the past. The proposals to redefine marriage are, I believe, an example of that. The steady progress of secularisation and the removal of faith from the public square is turning Christianity into a private religion. I don’t think it would be impossible for us to reach a stage where talking to someone about the gospel in public would be illegal.

But, in general, Christian persecution in this country is much more personal and subtle for individuals. For example, have you ever had a friend who has stopped talking to you because you tried to tell them about the gospel? Have you ever been overlooked for a promotion at work because you didn’t want to work on Sundays? Have you ever been disciplined for wearing Christian jewellery? Has anyone ever called you stupid or deluded because you have faith?

At Word Alive a couple of years ago, director of the FIEC John Stevens talked about how he was ostracised from his parents because they wanted him to become a lawyer, whereas God led him into full-time Christian ministry. He gave up a lucrative career for the sake of the gospel, and the relationship with his parents suffered as a result. These are not uncommon experiences. If we live lives which show the gospel, some people will react against it.

Also, notice what Paul says in v4, the church were undergoing “persecutions *and trials*”. Trials in this sense means more than people persecuting us for the sake of the gospel, it’s more like a hard time we go through which leads us to doubt and question our faith. We’ll talk about this a bit more in the next section, but just because we aren’t being ‘persecuted’ in the same way churches in other countries doesn’t mean we aren’t undergoing trials. We all go through hard times; these are trials of our faith.

Well, let’s move on to the next heading. The Thessalonian church was being persecuted. What did God have to say about it?

Persecution is evidence of God’s righteous judgement (v5)

In verse 5, Paul says “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.” Now this is a surprise to us, isn’t it? Paul says that the persecution of the Thessalonian church is *evidence that God’s judgement*

is right. In other words, it turns their expectations upside down: the very thing which they thought made God wrong is actually evidence that he is right.

How can this possibly be? How can it be the case that something *unjust* is actually evidence of God's *righteous judgement*? Surely that doesn't make sense! Well, let's just take a step back for a moment and have a look at the wider Biblical picture of persecution and suffering. What is the point of it? Why is it necessary? How does the Bible see persecution?

This is what James 1:2-3 says: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." So James says that the persecution we receive as Christians should be a 'pure joy', because it produces perseverance in us: it builds up our character, our personality, so that we are able to put our trust in God and carry on through it.

Similarly, Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:7, " [all kinds of trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed." So Peter says that temptation comes in order that faith may be *proved genuine*.

These two things – genuine faith and perseverance – are two sides of the same coin. We persevere if we have genuine faith. And if we persevere, this will build up our faith.

I don't know if you've ever read the book "A Grief Observed" by C.S. Lewis. His wife died of cancer not long after they were married, and this book is written as an honest diary of his feelings for a few months afterwards. One of the things he said which really struck me was the idea that we don't really know whether our faith is real or not until it's tested. He uses the illustration of a house of cards. Have you ever built a structure from playing cards? It's pretty fragile, isn't it? – If someone opens a door nearby or you sneeze, it all falls down!

And C.S. Lewis says, this is like how we build our faith – a house of cards. All it takes is for some trial to come along and it all falls down. It's easy to be a Christian when things are going well, when we're not undergoing any suffering or persecution. But do we really trust in God, or do we trust in ourselves? When we go through persecution, when we go through trials like that, God says to us "build your faith on me."

And, coming back to Paul's argument, I think this is exactly what he means. "As a result *you will be counted worthy* of the Kingdom of God, for which you are suffering". It is because the Thessalonians are being tested, because they are being persecuted, *and yet* because they are persevering, God is proved right in counting them worthy of the Kingdom of God. Look at v3-4 – their "faith is growing more and more", their "love is increasing", and their "perseverance and faith" is so much in evidence that Paul can tell other churches about it. In fact the word he uses is 'boast', which is not so much in the sense of 'look what I've done' but about giving God the glory and praise for what he is doing there. Their faith is genuine, it has been proved, and as such they will be counted worthy.

So how does this apply to us? I think the main thing to remember is that we also need to persevere, even though our circumstances may look bleak. I know there are plenty of people who, when they go through hard times, simply give up on Christianity. This is particularly true if that hard time comes as a direct consequence of being a Christian. They say, "I don't see how God could let that happen to

me”, and walk away from it. They stop going to church. They stop praying, stop reading their Bibles, and move away from God.

But what I think Paul would have us understand from this passage is that it is those very trials which prove our faith in him. It is through those trials which test our faith that we see God’s judgement is right, and if we persevere we will be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God.

And, of course, we are not alone. Jesus himself promised to be with believers, until the very end of the age. He is with us in all our trials. And the safest and best place to be for the Thessalonian believers, and us, is in his hands. How do we know that is the case? Because we know what’s going to happen in the future.

God will make all things right at the end of time (v6-10)

At the start we looked at Psalm 94: why do evil men seem to prosper, they seem to be able to mock God without any consequences. Well, Paul says that ultimately, no-one is able to mock God’s justice. His justice is perfect and unavoidable:

(v6) God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

How is it possible for a Christian to look around the world at all the injustice and suffering, and then say that God is just? Because there will come a day when God’s justice will be revealed. God will grant relief to those who are troubled, who have been persecuted for His name. There is a beautiful picture of this rest in Revelation 7:17: “For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

You see, God has promised rest to all those who persevere in faith, no matter how difficult the trials may have been on earth. In fact, Paul says in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” What lies in wait for those who believe is so much greater than any sufferings we may go through now, it’s not even worthy of a comparison!

But, the other side of the coin is that God has promised judgement and “everlasting destruction” for those who do not know and obey the Lord Jesus. The idea of “blazing fire” is taken from Old Testament images of God’s justice and holiness. He is holy, he is just, and he must act to destroy all that which is unjust because that is his nature.

For those Christians who are being persecuted and suffering, Paul says that there will come a day when there is justice. Those who persevere to the end will be vindicated. And Paul says to the Thessalonians, “this includes you, because you believed our testimony to you”. The church in Thessalonica heard the message of the apostles, and they believed it.

And this is the question for us today: have you heard and believed the message of the apostles?

Notice what Paul says in verse 8, God will punish “those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel”. It’s important to make clear that Paul isn’t saying that only those people who obey all of God’s commandments will be accounted worthy! But that the gospel itself is a call to obedience. Acts 17:30 says, “but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.” The gospel is both good news for us, and a call to be obedient to it. Do you believe that our sins are covered by the blood of Christ Jesus? Do you trust that the punishment you justly deserve fell on Jesus at the cross? Have you been accounted worthy by God?

As this chapter makes clear, there are eternal consequences. God is not mocked, and whether you know God or not you will see his justice. If you are trusting in the gospel today, then this should be an encouragement: every injustice in the world will be made right at the end of time when God reveals his perfect justice. What we are suffering now will be as nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed. And we can be thankful to God that he has accounted us worthy. But if you are not trusting in the gospel, this is a challenge: have you understood the implications of what that means? If you’d like to know more about that, do please talk to me or Mark or one of the team afterwards.

So, we’ve spent some time looking at persecution and how that is evidence of God’s righteous judgement. We’ve looked at how God will reveal his justice at the end of time. But how does that all pan out now, in the life of the everyday believer? How should we respond to all this?

We must work for God’s purposes to His glory (v11-12)

In verses 11-12, Paul writes down what they pray for the believers in Thessalonica:

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Note that little phrase ‘count you worthy of his calling’, which Paul mentioned once before in verse 5. Being counted worthy doesn’t mean doing so many good works that we eventually earn the right to be called worthy, but believing in trusting in the Lord Jesus and trusting in him for his righteousness. In Romans 4:3, Paul – quoting the Old Testament – says “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”. Believing in the gospel of the Lord Jesus counts us as worthy.

So what Paul is doing here is not saying “I pray that you will do enough good works so that God will count you worthy”. What he is saying is, “I pray that you will *continue in faith*”, so that – at the end, in the future – God will count you worthy. What Paul wanted them, and us, to do is to continue in faith: to persevere, to hold on.

If you’re going through a tough time at the moment – whatever the reasons may be, but especially if it’s a result of the gospel – don’t give up. Keep coming to church. Keep persevering. Seek support if you need to – join a home group, or talk with a trusted friend. This letter was written to a church, a

community of believers, not a collection of individuals. A community supports its members. Similarly, if you're not going through a hard time at the moment, but you know someone who is, why don't you offer to support them - pray for them, talk to them, be there for them?

Perseverance does not come automatically, it's not a given, and we have to help each other out.

Paul then goes on to pray that God would "fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith". I don't know about you, but I often find that I can become weary of being a Christian. Not so much in a way which would lead me to stop being a Christian, but something more like getting tired of trying to live a distinctive Christian life. "What's the point in me not swearing at work, when everybody else does? What's the point in discussing Christianity with my atheist friend, when she's not going to change her mind? What's the point in trying to campaign for traditional marriage, because the government aren't going to listen anyway?"

What Paul is saying to us is that we shouldn't become weary of these things even under trials, even under persecution. We should not give up acts which are "prompted by our faith." We need to remember that it is God who fulfils his purposes, not us. Although we may not see much happening, God is still working. Be encouraged and continue to try to fulfil God's purposes for our lives.

Finally, Paul prays all this "so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him". We do all this to bring glory to God, and so that he will glorify us in himself.

John Stott describes this glory as being like a light bulb. The church is like the filament of a light bulb, and at the end of time it will be switched on and will glow brightly with God's glory. If we believe and trust in the Lord Jesus, no matter what we are going through now, if we persevere then that is our ultimate destination.

Let's pray.

Father God, we ask that in your mercy and grace you would keep us believing and trusting in you. We ask that you would help us to love and support one another as a community, that you would help us encourage one another to keep striving for your purposes, so that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ would be glorified through us and in us. We pray these things for the sake of your Son, and in his name, Amen.