

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Christian Suffering – 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

In about AD 50, Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians. Although the situation of the church at Thessalonica was different from our situation here at Northolt Park, we've already been able to learn a lot from the letter – about what it means to be a *church*, what it means to be *converted*, what Christian *ministry* looks like.

Of course, we haven't said the last word on those topics. There are lots of places in the Bible which speak about the church, conversion, and ministry. Paul doesn't say *everything* there is to say about the church in 1 Thessalonians. The passage we looked at last week – 2:1-12 – is particularly rich in the way it speaks about ministry, but it's not the only passage in the Bible that speaks about ministry. And that's how it is with letters. When Paul writes a letter to a church, he is dealing with specific issues in that church, and he handles those issues in a way that's appropriate to the situation of that church. So, if he writes about conversion or ministry, he does so in a way that addresses the pastoral needs of the church; he doesn't give a long theological discussion covering every single thing he could say. That means, of course, if we want to get the *big picture* of what the Bible says about conversion or ministry, we would need to look at *other* passages, not just in Paul's letters, but elsewhere too.

That's important with today's topic too – *Christian suffering*. Reading between the lines of the letter, it's clear that the Thessalonian Christians are suffering; that surfaces a number of times, and this passage is one of those places. But it doesn't say all that could be said about the topic of suffering.

The Bible addresses the topic of suffering from different perspectives. If we were in *Genesis 3*, we would be thinking about the suffering that comes about because our relationship with God, with each other, and with the earth itself is fundamentally broken. If we were in

Lamentations, we would be thinking about the suffering we might bring on ourselves because God judges our willful disobedience of him. If we were in the book of *Job*, we would be thinking about suffering though innocent, for some higher purpose. If we were in *Deuteronomy*, we would be thinking of the suffering that comes from God's hand as a loving parent, to discipline us. If we were in *Isaiah 53*, we would be thinking of God's servant suffering on behalf of others. If we were in *Daniel* or *Revelation*, we would be thinking about the suffering which comes about as a result of persecution, when God's people suffer for their faith. That's the type of suffering that's in mind here in 1 Thessalonians.

It's not that those views of suffering contradict one another, of course; it's that the Bible is clear that there are many different reasons why we suffer. What we mustn't do is go to just one of those passages and make that the only and the last word of the Bible on suffering. If we want the big picture, we've got *lots* of passages to think about; and when we're reading any one of those passages, it's not a bad idea to try to understand their place in the big picture. How does Genesis 3, or Job, or Isaiah 53 fit into the larger whole?

All that reminds us that when we look at these verses in 1 Thessalonians, we're seeing just one passage about one particular type of suffering, which we need to understand in its own right, but which we also need to set, so far as we can, in the bigger framework of the whole Bible.

So, let's see what we learn from Paul...

1. Reception – of the word of God (2:13)

Paul said something similar back in 1:5. We might think that this doesn't say anything about suffering, but it's a crucial point in thinking about why God's people sometimes

suffer. The Thessalonians have received a message which changes their whole worldview, the way they think about God, the way they think about themselves, the way they understand what's wrong with the world and how that needs to be put right.

When people become Christians in Thessalonica, and when they start saying to Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the fulfilment of their Jewish hopes, that gets them into trouble – as we know it did in Thessalonica. When people receive, accept and believe the word of God, and when they start saying to Gentiles that whatever kingship the Roman emperor may claim for himself, there is no king but Jesus, that gets them into trouble – as we know it did in Thessalonica.

Why does opposition come? One answer from this passage is that when we give our allegiance to Jesus that might bring us into conflict with those who don't share that allegiance. Not everyone accepts, not everyone believes, and their rejection of the word of God may work itself out in opposition or hostility. The gospel draws a line in the sand, and when we claim to stand on one side of the line, when we say that there is no other way to God except through faith in Christ, that there is no other name under heaven given to us by which we must be saved, that can get us into trouble.

Of course, we need to make sure people are offended by the gospel and not our arrogance. In fact, the gospel ought to engender in us humility. Does Paul thank the Thessalonians for being so receptive to his teaching? No, he thanks *God* (2:13a). It is *God* who makes them responsive. They have not brought this about themselves; God has brought it about in them through his word. There's nothing in us that makes us worthy or acceptable of the gospel. And God *continues* to work in them through his word (2:13b).

When we receive, accept and believe this word, and when this word continues to work in us, that might bring hostility and persecution – even from those close to us. In fact, perhaps *especially* from those close to us, because the line in the sand gets drawn close to home, with the people with who we have

the most contact. And that's what Paul goes on to speak about next...

2. Imitation – of the churches of God (2:14)

One of the proofs of God at work in us through his word is suffering. The positive reaction of the Thessalonians to the gospel in spite of suffering shows this wasn't simply a human word, but was God's word working in them (2:14). Because they accepted the word of God they suffered at the hands of their own countrymen. There is a pattern: you received... you accepted... you believed... you suffered...

The Judean churches were opposed by the Jews; the Thessalonian Christians were opposed by their own kind. Just as Sudanese Christians might be opposed by Muslim fundamentalists, or Chinese Christians opposed by Maoist dogmatists. The church is not only the community of those who have received the word of God as the word of God, accepted it and believed it; the church is also the community of those who are persecuted for the sake of the gospel.

So, the Thessalonians need to see their experience in the light of that pattern, to understand themselves as part of a larger movement, to be encouraged that their experience is not unique. Their suffering places them in solidarity with other believers. In doing so, they were following in the footsteps of the Christian communities back in Judea. Paul knew about the suffering of the churches in Judea because he was one of those who was spearheading the attacks (Acts 8:3; Galatians 1:22-23; 1 Timothy 1:13)!

Again, Paul said something earlier in the letter about them being imitators in suffering (1:6). Not only were they imitating other churches, they were following in the footsteps of the missionaries themselves and the Lord Jesus too. In fact, Paul draws out these links in 2:15-16 as well when he talks about the Lord Jesus and the prophets being killed, and the apostles being driven out.

So, the suffering they were going through was not unusual or unexpected; if anything, it seemed to be the norm for the early church. The churches back in Judea suffered from their

neighbours, and now the Thessalonians are suffering from their neighbours, and that's a mark that they're on the right track. That ought to have been encouraging for the Thessalonians. That's what Paul will go on to say in 3:2-4.

The fact they were suffering didn't mean something had gone horribly wrong for them. It meant they were on the same page as the earliest churches, the same page as Paul, the same page as the Old Testament prophets, the same page as Jesus himself. And all those who have suffered for the sake of Christ since likewise are part of the same pattern. And now the Thessalonians take their place in that line. If the word they had received was not the word of God, they would have given up ages ago, but because it is the word of God, and because it was working in them who believed, they had been able to continue in faith, love, and hope.

3. Vindication – by the judgment of God (2:15-16)

Vindication is also part of the pattern, and whatever tricky questions these verses throw up, that's the note on which the passage ends (2:15-16).

Paul has just mentioned the Jews who persecuted the churches back in Judea, and that seems to prompt him to say a little more about what they did. He makes a number of points: first of all, 'they killed the Lord Jesus'; second, they killed the prophets (showing there was a long line of opposition to God's messengers which culminated in the rejection of his son); thirdly, says Paul, they 'drove us out' (we know from Acts that that happened, not least in Thessalonica itself, Acts 8:1; 9:28-30; 13:50; 14:5-6; 16:39; 17:14); fourthly, 'they displease God'; fifthly, they are 'hostile to all people'; and sixthly, it appears they displease God and are hostile to all people particularly by keeping Paul and the missionaries from speaking to the Gentiles so that they might be saved. Their opposition to the apostles was not only a personal attack against them, but an attack against humanity, blocking the way of the good news of salvation.

And once again, this is part of a long history of rejection. Paul speaks of 'heaping up sins to the limit', which echoes a theme in Scripture that the sins of a people come to their full measure before God exercises judgment (e.g., Genesis 15:15-16; Matthew 23:32). And that's where Paul ends the passage: 'the wrath of God has come upon them at last' (2:16c). 'At last' does not mean 'and about time too!' as though Paul was pleased wrath had come on them. The words mean something like 'fully' or 'completely' or 'in a final way'. Even if it's not exactly clear what Paul is saying there, it is certain that they won't escape judgment.

These are harsh words from someone who's just claimed to be a loving, caring, gentle mother, aren't they?! In fact, Paul has sometimes been accused of being *anti-semitic* here. But, of course, that's simply not the case. It may well be that Paul is writing about a very specific bunch of Jews who did oppose the gospel; so perhaps Paul is not talking about all Jews in general, but those who did the things about which he speaks.

But more significant even than that is that Paul is not being anti-semitic, because he himself is a Jew! So, this an *insider's* charge, made by a Jew against fellow Jews. If Paul was anti-semitic, then Jesus was too, since he also pronounced judgment on Israel using very strong language (see Matthew 23:29-39). And so did Israel's prophets before him – as Jews to their fellow Jews, when they opposed God and God's purposes. Remember – Paul knows all about this from the other side of the fence, because he had been a persecutor of Christians himself.

Anti-semitism is racially motivated, and that's clearly not what is going on here. This is not a *race* issue, this is a *religious* issue. It reflects the difference between Christianity and Judaism that begins to emerge in the New Testament. It reflects the fact that Christians acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfilment of God's purposes for humanity, Jew and Gentile, and Judaism doesn't. The Jews opposed Paul's ministry to Gentiles not because they didn't believe Gentiles could be brought into the covenant fold, but because Paul was proposing that Gentiles could be brought in

without reference to the law, without reference to circumcision, without reference to the sacrifices in the temple, but with reference only to Jesus, who was the fulfilment of Israel's hopes.

Again, we need to remember this is a letter, so Paul is not saying everything that could be said about this topic in this one place. He has a lot to say about Israel elsewhere in his letters, especially in Romans 9-11 where it's clear that he loved his own people and longed for them to be saved. God has not rejected his people Israel; he has redrawn the boundaries of what it means to belong to the people of God, and those boundaries now include Gentiles as well as Jews. God had announced to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his offspring (Genesis 12:1-3). The prophets looked forward to a time when God's salvation would come to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6). That plan was now coming to pass in Jesus and Paul's mission to the Gentiles; to stand in the way of that was to stand in the way of God's plan of salvation. And those who do that, says Paul, can only expect judgment at the hand of God.

Of course, Paul's main concern is to encourage the Thessalonians by showing them that their experience of persecution was part of longer-term patterns of response to God's word, and to give them confidence that they can keep going despite their suffering, because the persecution they experience now will result in their vindication to come. They are those who have turned to God from idols, as Paul has said in 1:10, and they are waiting for Jesus who rescues them from the wrath to come.

All this might not mean much to us today, although some of us may experience hostility because of our faith. But maybe a passage like this will be crucial one day; maybe the church in the UK will suffer a period where Christians will not be tolerated, where those who profess Christ will suffer. And there are many places in the world where people do suffer persecution as a result of receiving the word of God. This passage reminds us and them to be encouraged that nothing has gone wrong with God's plan for us. We are sharing in the sufferings of God's true people, of Christ himself, and – like him – we will be vindicated in God's good time. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 7 October 2007