

Enduring for the Sake of the Gospel
1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

Introduction

How can you tell that something is important to someone? If it is an object, how much money the person will spend to acquire it is one method of assessment. Or perhaps more accurately, how much time they will work to earn the purchase price since something that costs several thousand dollars may mean very little to a wealthy man while something that is purchased for only a couple of hundred dollars can be very precious to someone that is poor.

How would you know that a relationship is important? According to love songs, it can be assessed by the obstacles overcome in order to see the beloved. The poets can write of crossing wide rivers or oceans, scaling tall mountains, crossing great deserts and pushing through terrible storms as proof of their love. However, if your bard will not venture out into the rain to see you, then keep looking. Action, not words, will be the proof the relationship is important.

How do you demonstrate that intangible things such as ideas and beliefs are important to you? By both the promotion of those beliefs and holding tight to them even when opposed. That is why the current battle for election integrity is so important. It is a fight for integrity as a land of truth, law, justice and freedom. If it is lost, the last vestiges of what made America a great nation will be removed as socialists carry out their stated plans and the final nails will be driven into the coffin of American character. That also means that Christians here - the ones that actually believe and follow the Bible - can expect to live under persecution as have believers throughout time and currently do in other nations. You will demonstrate the importance of the gospel of Jesus Christ to you by how much you will be willing to suffer and endure to proclaim it and live according to it. Turn once again to 1 Thessalonians as we examine the example this model church has left for us.

Review - 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:13

The book of Acts records that opposition arose quite often against Paul as he preached the gospel throughout what is now modern day Turkey. His experience in preaching and starting churches in Macedonia were the same. Jealous Gentiles opposed him in Philippi, and jealous Jews opposed him in Thessalonica after he taught in the local synagogue for three Sabbaths resulting in some of the Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women being persuaded to believe their message. The opposition became so great and dangerous that the new believers in Thessalonica sent Paul & Silas away to Berea for their safety - where of course they started another church. When the jealous Jews from Thessalonica found out, they went to Berea and stirred up trouble again resulting in Paul being sent to Athens.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was the result of Timothy's return from there with a good report about them. In great thanksgiving to God for what He was doing in the Thessalonians, Paul writes commending them for their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus (1:3). He cites as evidence their turning from their idols to serve the living and true God and waiting for the return of Jesus from heaven (1:9-10). Paul also commends them for becoming imitators of the missionaries in both how they received the gospel and how they spread it both east and west in Macedonia and to the south in Achaia. Their response demonstrated that they were indeed among God's elect (1:4).

Beginning in chapter 2 Paul gives a defense of their motives and ministry among the Thessalonians by contrasting it with those of the religious hucksters that were common at the time. This may have been because false teachers had already arisen among them or in anticipation of it happening just as he had warned the Ephesian elders (Acts 20). Paul wanted them to be able to discern between false teachers that would prey upon them and true teachers that would serve them. False teachers exploit others for personal gain while men of God seek God's glory and expend themselves for the sake of others. The motivation of Paul and his companions was simply to please God, and they came with a message that was true, pure and without deceit. Their manner of ministry proved their motives even expending themselves in manual labor to support themselves so they would not be a financial burden to the Thessalonians. They behaved devoutly, uprightly and blamelessly toward them while being as gentle as a nursing mother and directive as a father in exhorting, encouraging and imploring them to walk in a manner worthy of God's calling.

Last week we examined in detail Paul's thankfulness to God in how the Thessalonians received their message and accepted it for what it really was, the word of God. This was additional evidence that it was God that was at work in them, because as 1 Corinthians 2:14 states, *"a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."* The Holy Spirit caused them to recognize that what the missionaries were proclaiming was not the word of men like they would have heard from any of the pagan priests, the philosophers or the religious hucksters of that time. Instead, they recognized that these were men moved by the Holy Spirit to speak from God (2 Peter 1:20-21).

The Holy Spirit continues that same kind of work today as He convicts people of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8) and then quickens their spirit to make it alive to believe, repent and receive the truth. We are to proclaim God's word (2 Tim 4:2) seeking to persuade people (2 Cor. 5:11) even begging them to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20), but it is the Holy Spirit that saves. That is why evangelism must begin and end with prayer - *Lord, open their ears to hear and minds to comprehend the truth of your Word, and quicken their spirit to believe and respond to the Gospel.*

At the end of 1 Thessalonians 3:13 Paul remarks that the word of God *"also performs its work in you who believe."* I pointed out last week that this verb tense here shows it to be both active and passive in action. In the passive sense, the Scriptures are a witness to God's character, actions, will and commands that man might know Him and obey Him. In the active sense, the Bible changes us for as Hebrews 4:12 states, *"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* The Holy Spirit uses God's Word to change you as described in Psalm 19. It restores the soul; makes wise the simple; rejoices the heart; enlightens the eyes; warns of evil, and gives great reward to those that keep its precepts. As Paul continues in verse 14, he points out a specific way the Thessalonians had been changed.

Becoming Imitators - 1 Thessalonians 2:14

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

Paul had commended the Thessalonians in 1:6-7 of imitating Paul and his companions and of the Lord in *"having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."* Paul now expands on that stating they also became imitators of the churches in Judea.

Imitation (μιμητής / mimātās) is to mimic, to follow the same pattern, example or model of someone else. In this case, the specific imitation to which Paul is referring is their responding in the same way to suffering for the faith as did the churches in Judea. The book of Acts gives us a summary account of what happened when the church began, but I want to point out a few details here before we look at that record.

First, note that Paul refers to the Thessalonian believers as “brethren.” That is significant because remember that church was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and Paul and the missionaries with him, except for perhaps Luke, were also Jews. Paul is going to point out the animosity that many religious Jews had toward Gentiles, so Paul is making a clear distinction between Jews who are Christians such as himself and these other Jews that persecuted Christians. Paul considered other Christians to be part of the same family whether Jew or Gentile, and so he uses brethren throughout his letters for fellow disciples of Christ. It is not just a term of endearment, it is a stated fact of reality since every true believer in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is adopted into God’s family (John 1:12; Rom. 8:15; Eph. 1:5). The church, the body of Christ, is made up of people who are spiritual brothers and sisters who become more dear to us than our blood relatives. Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are all made one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). That is the only source of true racial reconciliation. That means that while we are not blind to differences in blood lines, language, ethnic and cultural heritages, those things are immaterial to our love and care for one another because we are one in Christ and recognize that showing partiality is sin (James 2:1-9).

The word church here is actually assembly (ἐκκλησία / ekklēsia), a gathering of called out people. There are many kinds of assemblies in many places, so Paul is very specific that their imitation is of the assemblies of God in Judea that are in Christ Jesus. We can understand how they were responding to suffering by looking at the example of those churches.

Acts 2 records the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost resulting in about 3,000 souls believing and being baptized. In Acts 3 Peter and John heal the lame man by the Temple gate called Beautiful, and Peter’s second sermon results in about five thousand men coming to believe, but is also resulted in the religious leaders arresting Peter and John and putting them in jail as recorded in Acts 4. They were threatened and released the next day, but persecution soon escalated as the church continued to grow daily. Acts 5 records the apostles being arrested, beaten and threatened again before being released. Persecution continued to escalate as Acts 6 records the arrest of Stephen, and Acts 7 his defense and martyrdom followed in Acts 8 by a great persecution arising in Jerusalem forcing the people of the church to scatter into the regions of Judea and Samaria and eventually beyond. What did those believers then do? They proclaimed the gospel wherever they went resulting in salvation of Samaritans (Acts 8), then Gentiles (Acts 10) and then Gentile churches being planted in distant places such as Antioch (Acts 11). In Acts 12 Peter is arrested and delivered by an angel. The missionary journeys begin in Acts 13.

Paul states here that the church in Thessalonica suffered the same kind of treatment and responded in the same way. He already pointed out in 1:7-8 how the gospel had spread from them throughout Macedonia and south to Achaia. Paul reveals that the Thessalonians had also experienced physical persecution similar to that of the Judean churches. The word suffer (πάσχω / paschō) refers to pain coming from an outside source, and that source was their fellow countrymen. The word here (συμφυλέτης / sumphuletās) refers to those of the same tribe or ethnic group. The initial persecution as recorded in Acts 17 was caused by the Jews and directed at Paul and the missionaries. Apparently, after Paul and Silas had been forced to flee to Berea, the persecution widened to include Gentiles joining in the persecution of the Christians. We know these were other Greeks because they made up the greater portion of the church there, and the contrast is to the Jews doing this there to Jews who did it in Judea.

That is not surprising because even today those that turn from the religion of their ethnic heritage to believe and follow the Lord Jesus Christ are often persecuted by their relatives because they are seen as rejecting the family and traitors to their heritage. Some of you have experienced that in your own life. This can reach severe levels of being shunned, or being considered dead to the family, or even to actual martyrdom as can occur in Muslim families.

Paul’s reference to “the Jews” here and quite often throughout his epistles is specifically to the religious Jews that persecuted those who were godly and not to Jews as a nation or a people in general.

Paul was obviously not anti-Semitic since he was Jewish himself and had a great desire to see Jewish people come to faith in Jesus the Messiah (Phil. 3:5; Rom. 9:1-5). Yet his mentioning of the suffering caused by these religious Jews causes him to react by going into a strong and detailed description of their persecution of the godly.

Jewish Persecutors - 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16

. . . even as they from the Jews ¹⁵ who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, ¹⁶ hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

There are a lot of possible reasons that Paul has such a strong reaction which he expresses here. Certainly it would include what he had personally suffered from it. It would also include the frustration he experienced as those who were hard hearted affected others. But there would also have been the reality that he knew exactly what he was talking about because he had been among those persecutors with Acts 8 and 9 describing the havoc he had caused when he entered houses and dragged men and women off to prison and was planning to do the same in Damascus until the Lord appeared to him in a bright light, rebuked him, and changed his heart and mind. Paul had thought that his background and radical change would cause those who had joined him in persecuting the church to take heart and change as well, but instead it only infuriated them resulting in plots to murder Paul (Acts 9:23-25, 28-30; 22-25). He recognized they were zealous without knowledge (Rom. 10:2), but he also recognized they were evil and dangerous.

Paul begins with their greatest crime recorded in all four gospels and proclaimed by Peter in both of his early sermons. They killed the Lord. Peter states it this way in Acts 2:36, *“Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”* He went into more detail in Acts 3:13-15 stating, ¹³ *“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him.”* ¹⁴ *“But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.”* Peter is direct in his defense before the Sanhedrin concerning the lame man he had healed by charging them in Acts 4:10, *“let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead - by this name this man stands here before you in good health.”*

In saying this Paul is not removing the guilt from Pilot and the Gentiles involved in Jesus’ death, but it is to say as Jesus did in John 19:11 that the greater sin belongs to the one that delivered Jesus up to Pilot to be tried and crucified. Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him because they did not know what they were doing (Luke 23:34), but the religious leaders did know Jesus’ identity and they rejected Him. They were also well aware of their own motives in wanting to see Jesus dead.

The word for kill here (ἀποκτείνω / apokteinō) means to cause someone’s death, normally by violent means, and crucifixion is very violent. Intent and justification for it is determined by the passage, and in this case they did it on purpose without legal justification either according to Mosaic Law or Roman Law since Pilot declared that he found no fault in Jesus (John 19:4-6). I should point out that in the Greek, Paul separates the title Lord from the name Jesus with this verb which allows an emphasis on each. They murdered the Lord and the Lord is identified as Jesus.

Paul also points out this is in keeping with the practices of their evil forefathers in the same way Jesus did in Matthew 23:31 & Luke 11:47. They were simply following the practices of the evil religious Jews that had gone before them that had killed the prophets.

Paul next cites the fact that “they drove us out.” The verb here (ἐκδιώκω / ekdiōkō) means “to pursue to the point of driving out.”

It is persecution that forces the victims to flee. Paul could be specifically referring to being forced to leave both Thessalonica and Berea which they would have known about personally, or a more general reference to similar incidents he and his companions had encountered in other places in their church planting endeavors. It would take a lot to drive Paul out of a place. Recall from Acts 14:19-20 that after Paul had been stoned and left for dead, he then rose up and went back into the city before departing the next day with Barnabas for Derbe. He also did not leave immediately after being released from jail in Philippi. I get the sense from these incidents and his description of things he had experienced in 2 Corinthians 11 that Paul was not afraid for himself, but had concern for those with him and those to whom he was ministering.

In a classic understatement Paul states, “*And to God, they are not pleasing.*” They were indeed quite the opposite even if they sincerely thought they were doing the right thing. Paul knew this well personally since he was a major persecutor of the early church in his misplaced zeal to serve God (Phil. 3:6). It was Jesus’ direct intervention rebuking Paul as traveled to Damascus saying, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*” (Acts 9:4) that corrected him.

They were zealous, but with out knowledge, so they were hostile or opposed to all men. This would be a general reference to the religious ethnic pride they had in themselves as supposed followers of Moses, but Paul also gives a specific example in their hindering them from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. The word hinder here (κωλύω / kōluō) is to cause something not to happen, to prevent.

Please understand that these religious Jews were not against Gentiles becoming worshipers of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as long as it was according to their traditions. Recall that Jesus pronounced this woe in Matthew 23:15, “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.*” The problem they had with what Paul was preaching is that it did not require Gentiles to become Jewish proselytes first. That was the point of contention with the Judaizers in Acts 11:1-18; 15:1-35, Galatians and Colossians 2.

Different methods of prevention could be used to keep the missionaries from speaking including direct persecution in trying to keep them from coming or driving them out as already mentioned. Other methods of preventing the message from getting out would include slander to keep people away or paying attention to the missionaries. They could also disrupt a meeting so that the people could not hear the missionaries. The same basic techniques are still used today by groups that do not want the truth to be known as were used back then - slander, disrupt, threaten, persecute.

Note that the motive behind it is actually Satanic even if they were not personally aware of it. It was to prevent someone from hearing the gospel to keep them from being saved. The verb here is in the subjunctive mood meaning it was to prevent the possibility of being saved if they heard the gospel. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ according to Romans 10:17, but as the rest of that passage indicates, hearing alone is not enough. The Holy Spirit must be at work to overcome man’s dead spiritual nature so that he is made alive to be able to repent and believe.

Their evil filled them up with sin on every occasion. The idea of the verb here (ἀναπληρώω / anaplērōō) is to fill up a container to the brim. Their multiplied sins were reaching full measure resulting in God’s wrath being upon them to the end or to its completion.

Wrath (ὀργή / orgē) refers to divine punishment which is expressed in both the present time and promised for the future and will be meted out at the Great White Throne judgment in Revelation 20. However, this is in the aorist and not future tense so it is looking back at something already done and not forward to something that will be done. I think we tend to forget Romans 1:18 that “*the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in*

unrighteousness.” That includes not only the decline into depravity of the immoral unrighteous described in the rest of Romans 1, but also His wrath that abides on both the moral and the religious unrighteous described in Romans 2. The religious unrighteous become moral hypocrites and end up reaping the natural consequences of their sin such as theft and adultery. God’s wrath is displayed in the broken wreckage of relationships in which the marriage is dissolved or the husband and wife become adversarial or exploiters of one another. God’s wrath is also displayed in the depravity of mind held captive to their traditions which become idolatry. What comes to my mind is a man I saw praying at the Western Wall of the Temple mount in Jerusalem who thought he was getting God’s attention by his rapid body movements, but he was only working up a sweat and talking to a stack of stones. God’s wrath will continue to abide on such people until it is expressed in its fullness at the final judgment - unless they repent and turn to Christ.

Conclusions

Paul closes this chapter by expressing both his desire to see them again and his confidence in them in which he took glory and joy. This section is also a defense against any accusation that the missionaries had abandoned them. We will be looking at that passage in depth next week since Paul brings up the issue of Satan hindering them and I want to expand on that topic.

This morning we have seen that it was normal for churches to either begin in the midst of tribulation or persecution would quickly rise to oppose the new believers. We should not be surprised when the same thing happens today. Even so, these churches grew and spread the gospel to the surrounding areas and then beyond. That should also be an expectation and goal of modern church plants today. If the people are not sharing their faith in Christ with others, then there is legitimate reason to ask why? Something is not right and something needs to change.

There will always be those that will oppose the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of that opposition will come from religious people like the Jews in Judea and Thessalonica that Paul points out in today’s text. Some will oppose because it is contrary to their own desires, but others will oppose the gospel because they sincerely believe it is contrary to what God wants, so they believe they are serving God by persecuting Christians. That was true of Saul before he became the apostle Paul. It is our responsibility to continue to proclaim the truth that others may hear the gospel and may be saved including those who have set themselves up to be our enemies. Love means telling the truth, warning, and praying that God will intervene to change their minds and hearts that modern day Pauls might arise from among them.

Take heart, regardless of whatever opposition you face currently or in the future, God is still in control. He sent His son Jesus Christ to save the lost, and He is still in that business. That is why we are to be diligent about proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. God is also still holy and just with His wrath abiding on those who oppose Him and continue in their sin, and unless they repent and believe in Jesus Christ, His full wrath will be carried out upon them throughout eternity. God’s justice is often slow to come because He is patient and longsuffering, but you can be sure sure that it will come.

Sermon Notes - November 29, 2020
Enduring for the Sake of the Gospel - 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

Introduction

Evidence of _____: Amount spent to acquire. Obstacles overcome to gain.

Promotion and holding fast to _____ even when opposed and persecuted

Review - 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:13

It was common for Paul to experience _____ to the Gospel

Paul thanked _____ for His work in the Thessalonians

The missionaries motives were pure and their manner of ministry was _____

They were _____ to God for the Thessalonian response to the Word of God

The Holy Spirit _____ to bring sinners to salvation

The Word of God _____ in those who believe to change them

Becoming Imitators - 1 Thessalonians 2:14

Imitation (μιμητής / mimētās) is to mimic, to _____ the same pattern, example or model of someone else

The Thessalonians are “_____” though they are Gentiles and Paul is Jewish

The church is one body, one family - that is the source of true _____ reconciliation

Acts 2-8 records the birth of the church and the opposition that rose against it

The Thessalonians suffered and responded in the same way as the _____ churches

Suffer (πάσχω / paschō) refers to _____ coming from an outside source & that source was their own people

Similar persecution from _____ / relatives still occurs today

Paul used “the Jews” to refer to the religious Jews that _____ the godly - it is not anti-Semitic

Jewish Persecutors - 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16

Paul has strong words against the Jews

Their greatest crime was violently killing the _____ who is Jesus

The Gentiles were also guilty, but the _____ sin belonged to the Jews (John 19:11)

They were following the murderous example of their _____ (Matt. 23:31)

“They drove us out” (ἐκδιώκω / ekdiōkō) persecution causing victims to _____

To God, they were not pleasing

The Jews wanted Gentile _____, the Gospel did not require them to follow Jewish traditions
_____ the message by slander, disruption, threat and persecution

Satanic motive: _____ people from being saved

Filled up (ἀναπληρώω / anaplērōō) like a container filled to the _____

Wrath (ὀργή / orgē) - divine _____ both temporal and eternal

The religious unrighteous are moral _____ who suffer the consequences of their sins

Conclusions

Persecution is normal for churches, but God’s people _____ nevertheless

Opposition will come from many sources for different reasons - we speak the truth to them & _____ for them

God is in _____ regardless of circumstances

God’s justice is often slow coming because He is longsuffering, but His _____ will come

KIDS KORNER – Parents, you are responsible to apply God’s Word to your children’s lives. Here is some help. Young Children – draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. Older Children – Do one or more of the following: 1) How many times “Paul” is mentioned. 2) Talk with your parents about some of the things Paul endured for the sake of the Gospel.

THINK ABOUT IT – Questions to consider in understanding the sermon and its application. How can you tell if something is important to someone? How important was the gospel to the Thessalonian believers? Set the context for 1 Thessalonians 2:14-17. Why was Paul thankful to God for the Thessalonians? How did they respond to the missionaries’ message? Why? In what ways were they imitators of the churches in Judea? What is the significance of Paul calling them “brethren”? According to Acts, how quickly did persecution of the church arise and what was the result? Why would the Thessalonians’ own countrymen persecute them? What does Paul mean when he uses the term “the Jews”? Why does he have such strong words against those particular Jews? Is Paul anti-Semitic? Can this passage be used to promote anti-Semitism? Who killed Lord Jesus? Who killed the Prophets? What responsibility did the Gentiles have in Jesus’ death? In what ways did the Jews drive out Paul? Would there have been Jews that though they were pleasing God in persecuting the church? Explain. How did these things fill them up with sin? How did God’s wrath abide on them? What will be their eternal future? How should you respond to opposition to the Gospel? What will your eternal future be? How do we know God is still in control even when everything seems very much out of control?