

December 3, 2000 by Steve Brandon



More Expressions of Thanksgiving

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

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1. The Reception of the Word (verse 13)

2. The Suffering of the Saints (verses 14-16)

As we begin, let me remind you of the history behind Paul penning this letter to the church in Thessalonica. The church of the Thessalonians was established by Paul during his 2nd missionary journey, somewhere around 50-54 AD, some 20 years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having recently visited the churches which he had established during his 1st missionary journey in Asia Minor, Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit, continued west on his journeys until he reached Macedonia, a region containing the city of Thessalonica.

In Macedonia, he ministered in Philippi, until expelled from the city. He next arrived at Thessalonica, where revival broke out - many people were saved. It is important to note that as Luke records the history of what happens in Thessalonica, we see the message preached, with two responses:

- The Jews (in general) rejected it and sought to run Paul out of town.
- Many Gentiles accepted it and a church was established in Thessalonica.

Having been kicked out of Thessalonica, he proceeded to Berea, then Athens, then Corinth, where he stayed for a period of 18 months. It was here in Corinth, where he penned this letter we have been studying.

In chapter 1 of this letter, Paul had first expressed his thankfulness to God for their conversion. Paul writes in chapter 1, verse 9, how they "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." But he is particularly thankful that they were continuing in genuine Christian character. He writes in chapter 1, verse 3, of their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." They had a faith that works, a love that labors and a hope that endures.

Having thanked God for their conversion, Paul then began chapter 2 with a defense of his own ministry among them. And you remember how the thrust of his argument in chapter 2 was that he had a genuine concern for the Thessalonians. He said that he had such affection for the Thessalonians that you might compare his ministry to that of a mother (2:7) and a father (2:11). He said that he had given his life for the Thessalonian believers.

I was most encouraged this week, as I picked up a commentary, written by J. B. Lightfoot. I looked in the introduction, and here is how he summarized Paul's epistle thus far. And he summarized it exactly as we have seen. Note what he says,

- i. The Apostle gratefully records their conversion to the Gospel and progress in the faith (1:2-10)
- ii. He reminds them how pure and blameless his life and ministry among them had been (2:1-12)
- iii. He repeats his thanksgiving for their conversion, dwelling especially on the persecutions which they had endured (2:13-16)

Indeed, Lightfoot summarizes this last section for us as well: "Paul repeats his thanksgiving for their conversion, dwelling especially on the persecutions which they had endured (2:13-16)." My sermon is appropriately titled, "More Expressions of Thanksgiving."

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. 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, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

Before we begin to exposit these verses this evening, I want you to first of all, notice the similarities between these verses we are looking at and the first 10 verses of chapter 1.

1. They both are about giving of thanks to God. "We also constantly *thank God*" (2:13). "We *give thanks to God*" (1:2).

2. They both mention how the prayer is always ascending to God. "We also *constantly* thank God" (2:13). "We give thanks to God *always*" (1:2).
3. The reception of the message is mentioned. "When you *received* from us the word of God's message" (2:13). "Having *received* the word in much tribulation" (1:6).
4. The mention of the message which was received. "When you received from us *the word of God's message*" (2:13). "Our *gospel* did not come to you in word only. ... Having received *the word* in much tribulation" (1:5, 6).
5. The effect of the working of the gospel is in both sections. "The word of God, which also *performs its work* in you who believe" (2:13). "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also *in power* and *in the Holy Spirit* and with *full conviction*" (1:5).
6. The transformation of the Thessalonian lives. "For you, brethren, became *imitators* of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea" (2:14). "You also became *imitators* of us and of the Lord" (1:6).
7. The circumstances surrounding their reception of the gospel. "For you also endured the same *sufferings* at the hands of your own countrymen" (2:14). "Having received the word in much *tribulation*" (1:6).

I point this out to you to demonstrate to you how similar the content is between chapter 1 and chapter 2, and the similarities of my sermon title "More Expressions of Thanksgiving" with my sermon title in chapter 1:1-10, "Expressions of Thanksgiving." In both sections, Paul is basically expressing his thanks to God for how the Thessalonians received the message Paul and Silas preached to them. The nuances of differences here is that **in chapter 1, Paul focuses mostly on the fruit they bore:**

"Constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (1:3).

"You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1:7).

"For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything" (1:8).

"For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1:9).

"And to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1:10).

In chapter 2, Paul focuses mostly on the sufferings they experienced:

"... for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews" (2:14). "who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men" (2:15).

"hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost" (2:16).

If you look at the text before us, it really breaks down nicely into two sections. The first section speaks about how the word of God was received (that is, how it was accepted and what it did in the life of the Thessalonians). The second section describes how the Thessalonians suffered (that is, how their suffering compared to the Jews in Judea). So, I would like to outline our passage tonight with two points:

1. The Reception of the Word (:13)
2. The Suffering of the Saints (:14-16)

And again, as much as possible, I would like to derive my outlines using the words of the text themselves. You will notice in verse 13, the word, "Received." You will notice in verse 14, the word, "Sufferings." Notice that the "Reception of the Word" has primarily a human and divine interaction. In other words, when they received the message, they received a message from God. Paul is thankful to God that they received the message. On the other hand, notice that the "Suffering of the Saints" has primarily a human and human interaction. That is, the suffering which these Thessalonians experienced was from other men. It is around these two words that our exhortation tonight will come: "Reception" and "Suffering." Let us first look tonight at ...

1. The Reception of the Word (verse 13)

In past weeks, we have discussed several of these things. And yet, we still have need to step through this passage and press the application to each of us. Look at the beginning of verse 13. Paul writes, "And for this reason." This phrase is used in the scripture to either point forward or backward. Paul will express his thanks to God either for what he just wrote, or for what he will write. I think that it is best understood in this context to point forward to what Paul is going to mention about the Thessalonian believers. He says, "here is the reason why I am thanking God ... that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God." In other words, Paul is most thankful to God that he when he came into Thessalonica and preached the message of the gospel, he saw the gospel received and embraced by the Thessalonians.

He saw these Thessalonians receive it. But, he also saw many reject it. You may remember how in Thessalonica, back in Acts 17, particularly how the Jews became jealous [perhaps because of the Gentile crowds], took wicked men from the market place, and formed a mob to set the city in an uproar. Their purpose in these things was to kick Paul out of town. Many in Thessalonica rejected the message. In Acts 17, we get the picture that it was the Jews who rejected it. We shall see in 1 Thess. 2, that many of the Gentiles rejected it also. But Paul's thanks to God was extended on behalf of these few believers who did embrace the message that was preached. I know in my own heart what a thrill it gives me when people are receptive to the message of the gospel. So also did Paul abound in thanks to God.

I would have you also to notice here in verse 13 that Paul uses two words to describe their reception of the Gospel. "When you *received* from us the word of God's message, you *accepted* it not as the word of men, but the word of God." These two words (received and accepted) are

basically synonyms. In fact, in Luke 8 and in Mark 4, these are used to describe the reception of the word that fell upon the rocky soil and are translated the same, "received". Luke 8:13 says, "And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, *receive* the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away." Mark 4:16 says, "And in a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately *receive* it with joy." If you want to draw any distinction at all, the first word, translated "received," describes an objective, external reception of the message, (like a child receiving a book to read). The second word, translated "accepted," describes a whole-hearted welcome, which sees great worth in the object being received.

As I was thinking of a way to illustrate this for you, I thought that I might illustrate it like this. My one year old Hanna, likes her books she is able to use. And if you give it to her, she will take it from you and like it. She will play with it. However, if you give her her favorite stuffed animal, named "Millennium," she goes nuts. Not only does she like it. She loves it. She is like a dog getting a snack. When she see it, she will say, "La-La" (which is Hanna for "Millennium") and will reach he hand out to you to get it. When she receives it, she will cuddle it close to her, because she knows and understands its worth to her. (I wanted to show you her blanket, but the nursery workers would never survive without her blanket).

So did the Thessalonians receive the word of God. And at this point, I would like to press home the obvious application for us all. How do you receive the word of God's message? For the Thessalonians, Paul was describing here the initial message of the gospel that they received. For when Paul went to Thessalonica, it was the message of the Messiah that he preached. He preached that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who had to suffer and rise again from the dead. Jesus is the one in whom forgiveness is to be found. Jesus is the reigning king. This was Paul's message.

For the Thessalonians, they demonstrated their reception of the message of the gospel by repenting! The Thessalonians repented at hearing the message. You remember in 1:9, how they "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." You remember in 1:10, how they were waiting "for His Son from heaven [as the reigning king], whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come." Do you embrace the message of the gospel? Have you come to see your own sinfulness before a holy God?

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood; Hallelujah! What a Savior?

Guilty, vile and helpless we; Spotless Lamb of God was He;
"Full atonement" can it be? Hallelujah! What a Savior!

I the gospel like my daughter's stuffed animal to you? Do you embrace it and tenderly cherish it? Is it something that you long for? Is it something that you trust in?

I find it interesting how Paul describes the message he preached. He described it as "God's message." It wasn't "Paul's message." It didn't have human origin. It had divine origin! Someone has said that the gospel is not the kind of message that man would invent if he could, nor is it a message that he could invent if he would. It is God who invented this message. We have complete forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins. It is completely given by grace and favor to sinners. It is a message of simple trust in God's declaration of righteousness. That is the message, and I ask you, "do you embrace this message?" Because, if you do, your life will change. The Word of God will take root in your soul and begin to work a work in you that you cannot describe.

Though Paul was describing particularly the reception of the gospel message, we can extend this to apply to all of God's words that He was written to us, which is the Bible. Do you love the words of the Bible? "Oh how I love Thy Law, it is my meditation day and night" (Ps. 119:97). The delight of the righteous is in the law of the LORD (Psalm 1). In Psalm 19, we are told that the word of God is more precious than riches and sweeter than honey. People love for and long for the word of God because of what it does within them.

Look at what happened to the Thessalonians. At the end of verse 13, it says, "you received ... the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." The idea here is that when the Thessalonians heard the message from the lips of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, it began to produce a work in them. Literally, they began to be energized! The Greek word used here is *energew*(*energeo*). We get the word "energize" from this word. It means, "to work." The word of God is like gasoline in a car. It is the fuel that causes the car to go. It is like food to the body. Without it, you will dry up and wither. With it, you will have the energy to face the day.

And if you are in Christ this evening, you know what this is about. If you have received the word of God's message, you know what has happened in your heart: (1) God has given you a desire for Himself. "When Thou didst say, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to Thee, 'Thy face, O LORD, I shall seek'" (Ps. 27:8). (2) God has given you a desire to seek Him. (3) God has given you a desire to know Him. "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). (4) God has given you a desire to worship Him. "The true circumcision [are those who] worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). (4) God has given you a desire to be like Him--not to be conformed to the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2), but to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). (5) God has given you a desire to be a witness for him. And all of these desires come about because the Spirit of God using the Word of God to quicken the soul of the believer to respond to God's message with thankfulness, love, and obedience.

A few days ago, I was watching a video of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. This video mixed shots of the Choir performing with testimonies from members of the choir. Many of these members used to be majorly involved with the street-life of New York City (gangs, drugs, alcohol, homelessness, sex, ...). You name it and they were involved with it. But time after time, they gave testimony to the transforming power of God. Lives that were totally messed up were changed and transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The world sees this. It cannot deny it.

A non-Christian who works with me at the hospital was recently telling me of one of his former roommates, whose life totally changed and is now a missionary in some foreign land. My non-Christian friend told me, "He was the last person that I thought would become a Christian" (i.e. because of his lifestyle). So has been the case down through history. Whether it has been the story of Manasseh, king of Judah, or

Zaccheus, or Paul, or the Thessalonians, or Augustine, or John Newton, the testimony has been the same: The saving message of the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to transform lives. And the word of God, "performs the work that we cannot do."

Now, in the context here in Thessalonica, when Paul used the term, "word of God," he clearly was talking about the evangelistic message which Paul originally preached. There was only with them a little while and he only had opportunity to speak to them of the gospel. Does the scripture transform you? I know of a man who was converted simply by reading his Bible. The word of God is that powerful.

2. The Suffering of the Saints (verses 14-16)

The comparison (verse 14)

Paul wrote and told the Thessalonians that the word of God empowered them to be "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" (verse 14). Previously, Paul had told the Thessalonians that they were imitators of "us" (i.e. Paul, Silas, and Timothy), and of "the Lord" (i.e. Jesus Christ). But now, he tells them that they imitated a group of people they had never met before -- the churches in Judea.

So the idea here that Paul is conveying isn't so much that the Thessalonians imitated these people in Judea, by becoming their disciples, by following after them. But the idea is that they imitated them in the sense that they experienced the same things and responded the same way. Particularly, the experience that Paul was pointing to was sufferings that came from the hands of their own relatives, their own kinsmen, their own people (or, as the New American Standard puts it,) of their own countrymen!

And the important point of verses 15 and 16 (which are somewhat parenthetical) is to say that your sufferings are as difficult as any faced by those in Judea. "You also endured the *same* sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, *even* as they did from the Jews" (verse 14). Note the two comparison words: same, and even as. Paul is going to paint a bleak picture of the magnitude of the sinfulness of those in Judea with respect to prohibiting the work of God to carry forth. And I will come back to this point, because it is here where the encouragement lies for the Thessalonians (and thus, where it lies for us as well).

Let me mention that we are talking particularly about the Jews of the 1st century, who lived in Judea. Not the Jewish race in general. There is no place for anti-Semitism here in these verses. Paul was a Jew and had a tremendous heart for the Jews (i.e. Rom. 9:1-5). Let's look at what these people did....

The deeds (verse 15)

Paul gives five characteristics of these Jews:

1. They killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets. That the Jews had a large part in putting Jesus to death is indisputable. It was the Jewish populace, who cried out to Pontius Pilate "Let Him be crucified" (Matt. 27:22; Mark 15:14). It was the Jewish religious leaders who falsely condemned Him and brought Him to Pontius Pilate to be crucified (Luke 24:20; Acts 2:36). The magnitude of this sin is not to be diminished. To have a hand in murdering another person is one thing. To have a hand in murdering the son of the king is another. To have a hand in murdering the son of the King of kings is quite another. I remember when Michael Jordan's father was murdered a few years ago. The murderers were in great trouble, because of the person they murdered. The publicity went around the world.

That the Jews had a large part in killing the prophets is also indisputable. Jesus describes the Pharisees as those whose fathers shed the blood of the prophets (Matt. 23:30). Jesus also called Jerusalem, the city that "kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her." (Matt. 23:37). Jeremiah also describes Israel as those whose "sword has devoured their prophets." (Jer. 2:30). Nehemiah described Israel as those who "killed God's prophets who had admonished them" (Neh. 9:26). In terms of actual recording of the Jewish people killing their prophets, the historical books are generally pretty silent. There is the story of the killing of Zechariah, who prophesied against Israel (2 Chron. 24:21). Perhaps the best record of this (though without names) is the testimony of the writer to the Hebrews, who said of those who had conquering faith in chapter 11, "They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheep-skins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated" (Heb. 11:37).

2. They drove us out (or persecuted us). You will notice in the margin of the New American Standard that it says, "they persecuted us." The NASB and NIV both translate this "drove us out." The KJV and NKJV both used the word, "persecute." The word used means both of these things: to drive out and to persecute. Paul is most certainly talking about what happened after the stoning of Stephen. For some time, those Christians in Jerusalem were not being greatly persecuted, but after the stoning of Stephen, the persecution heightened. "And on that day a great *persecution* arose against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). Later, the Jews plotted to do away with Paul, who had to escape the city (Acts 9:23-25).

3. They are not pleasing to God. Of course they aren't pleasing to God! I believe that this phrase here takes very little explanation. Those who kill the righteous prophets and persecute those who propagate the gospel are not pleasing to God.

4. They are hostile to all men. Literally, they are against all men. Though these people might put up a front of religion, in actuality, they are actually hostile to all men, simply because they are hostile to the message of the gospel.

5. They are hindering the gospel from being preached. This is one way in which they demonstrate that they are actually hostile to all men, because they don't want to see any saved! These Jews wanted the Gentiles to become Proselytes, not Christian converts. That's why we have seen in recent months their hostility at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13), Iconium (Acts 14), Lystra (Acts 14), and Derbe (Acts 14), when it was primarily the Jews who were hostile to the message and drove the apostles out of town. The same happened in Thessalonica (Acts 17) and Berea (Acts 17). These Jews are not simply passively rejecting the message (which is bad enough). But these Jews are actually exerting great effort to see that the gospel doesn't go further, so they will put a stop to it.

It is sort of like the most recent Presidential elections. There are two type of voters: (1) those who have voted for a candidate and then have sat back to watch what happens (2) those who have voted for a candidate and have felt so strongly about it that they are actively making their voices known in the press as to their pleasure (or displeasure) of the outcome. And yet, the cause here is much greater. Eternal lives are at stake. And those who not only believe, but who attempt to hinder others in believing are the worst sorts to deal with. As one commentator said, "An unbeliever who is willing to live and let live with respect to personal convictions regarding God is less dangerous than on who not only disbelieves himself but also tries to keep others from hearing the gospel." -- Such were the Jews in Judea!

The result (verse 16)

What is the end result of these people?

1. They fill up the measure of their sins. Paul uses the image of a cup being filled up with liquid. This picture describes a certain limit on the sins that may be committed (i.e. the size of the cup). God has set the bounds of wickedness. We may say, as God did to the waters of the seas, "Thus far you shall come, but no farther; And here shall your proud waves stop" (Job 38:11). This is consistent with the words of Jesus, who told the Pharisees, to "fill up the measure of the guilt of your fathers" (Matt. 23:32). This is consistent with the Words of Genesis 15, which spoke of the "iniquity of the Amorite not yet being complete" (Gen. 15:16).

Now, it is difficult to understand here whether or not Paul has in mind the sins of the nations or the sins of each individual. But one thing is clear: God has a well-defined limit on the sins people will commit. There is no reason to doubt this, is there? In light of what we know about God and His sovereignty over all, would there be any doubt that He has complete control over the extent to which he allows sin to reign? Even in Acts 4, it describes God as allowing the sin of the people to reign in allowing the death of Christ as "His hand and His purpose predestined to occur."

Obviously, God is in control of the sins committed. While the kings of the earth take their stand against the Lord and His Anointed, He who sits in the heavens laughs (Psalm 2), because He is in sovereign control. As Jonathan Edwards put it, "God has set bounds to every man's wickedness; he suffers men to live, and to go on in sin, till they have filled up their measure, and then cuts them off" (The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2, p. 122).

Things don't escape the notice of God. One thing, however, to keep in mind during this is that their wickedness is great. It is seen as being filled up (as from a pitcher). It doesn't seem to be like a drop in the bucket. It seems like pouring into a glass--so great is the wickedness of these in Judea.

2. Wrath has come upon them to the utmost. Again, the emphasis of Paul here is upon the greatness of their transgressions. So great has it been that God's wrath has come with finality and completeness. It is interesting to note that we have a past action here - "wrath has come" - for you who know a little of Greek, it is an aorist verb. Now, to some extent, the wrath of God has fallen upon these people, but to another extent, is certainly hasn't come "upon them to the utmost" (or as the note says, "forever" or "altogether").

Perhaps God's wrath was poured out upon Jerusalem in AD 70, but knowing of His wrath to come, it must have only been partially poured out at that time. Paul is talking about people here, who won't be delivered "from the wrath to come" (1:10). These people have been exposed to Messiah. "They killed the Lord Jesus" (verse 15). They have been exposed to righteous prophets. "They killed the prophets" (verse 15). They have been exposed to the gospel. "They drove us out" (verse 15). They have hindered the proclamation of the gospel. They are "hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved" (verse 16). They had the law (the oracles of God), the covenants, the sacrifices, the prophets. They have sinned against great light! Perhaps Stephen said it best, "You who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet, did not keep it" (Acts 7:53). And God's wrath will come upon them. We need to remember that it is God's wrath that will come upon them. As Romans 12:19 - "Never take you own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

So, we get done with this, and we say, "So what? Paul, what is your point? And the important point of verses 15 and 16 (which are somewhat parenthetical) is to say that your sufferings are as difficult as any faced by those in Judea -- as bad as they are! "You also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews" (2:14). And when you face persecution that comes, be assured that it is God's message, working in you, which is sufficient to overcome that trial. You need to prepare now for the future by memorization and meditation. How is it that an aged saint can suffer through a debilitating disease with joy? Through years of memorizing and meditating on the gospel. May we realize the benefits of these things: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Thy word. With all my heart I have sought Thee; Do not let me wander from Thy commandments. Thy word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against Thee" (Ps. 119:9-11).

Persecution and sufferings at the hands of those who hate Christianity abounds in our culture today. It is appropriate that we attempt to help the believers in Nigeria today by sending Christian books to them to nourish their souls. We need to pray for Sudan, Indonesia, China, Vietnam. We need to help in whatever way that we can. We need to pray that they might find God's message sufficient to energize them during and through their sufferings. Suffering and persecution have always been the lot of God's people. Especially the church. You simply need to read through Acts to see this. In Acts 4 Peter and John are in Prison. In Acts 5 Peter returned to prison again. In Acts 7 Stephen was stoned. In Acts 8 the church was compelled to scatter for safety. In Acts 9 Paul was told, during his conversion, that he was "to suffer for My name's sake" (9:16). In Acts 12 James was killed and Peter was put in prison again (awaiting his death). In Acts 13 Paul was kicked out of Pisidian Antioch. In Acts 14 Paul was kicked out of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. In Acts 16 Paul and Silas were in prison in Philippi. In Acts 17 Paul was chased from Thessalonica and Berea. In Acts 21 Paul was seized in the temple in Jerusalem. In Acts 22-28 Paul was under trial.

The books of Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus were all written in prison. You simply need to read 1 Peter to see the necessity of persecution in the life of a Christian, "Even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials" (1 Peter 1:6). "Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also

are in the body" (Heb. 13:3). The church at Smyrna was told to "be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). I read these things and cower. I wish I could take my shirt off and show you the marks of the lashes I have received, as Paul did (Gal 6:17, "I have on my body the brand marks of Jesus), but I can't. But, I know that God's word is sufficient to carry you and me through the trials that may come upon us.

In the first century, a Greek governor, Pliny (the Younger) wrote to Trajan on how to deal with Christians. It gives an insight on the type of suffering and persecution that these people faced. He writes, "I was never present at any trial of Christians; therefore I do not know what are the customary penalties or investigation, and what limits are observed. ... This is the course that I have adopted in the case of those brought before me as Christians. I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment; if they persist I sentence them to death. For I do not doubt, that whatever kind of crime it may be to which they have confessed, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished." Trajan responded to Pliny's efforts, "You have taken the right line, my dear Pliny, in examining the cases of those denounced to you as Christians, for no hard and fast rule can be laid down, of universal application. They are not to be sought out; if they are informed against, and the charge is proved, they are to be punished, with this reservation--that if any one denies that he is a Christian, and actually proves it, that is by worshipping our gods, he shall be pardoned as a result of his recantation, however suspect he may have been with respect to the past."

Today, we are living in an aberration -- living at peace. Persecution may come, it may not come. We need to prepare ourselves to stand that day!! We need to pray thankful prayers for the Christians who are enduring! It demonstrates that God's word is alive and well as it works in the lives of those undergoing suffering.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 3, 2000 by Steve Brandon.
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