

## 2 Thessalonians 1 –

### Introduction

We all want reassurance in the face of impending pain. This is certainly true of my children when I've taken them to get their immunisations.

In the day or so leading up to their injections, our kids usually start to freak out about the needle that will soon be thrust into the side of their arm. This is particularly true on the car ride to the clinic. There are worried looking facial expressions, groans, and panicked discussions about who will go first.

Now, like most parents, Ruth and I don't like to see our kids stewing in their own fear so we speak to true and reassuring words to them. We say things like.

1. Your body will be stronger for this – you'll be less likely to get really sick..
2. It'll only sting for a moment, but then you'll have the joy of a lolly pop.
3. You won't be on your own, we'll be holding you the whole way through.

Sometimes we need reassuring words in the face of pain.

And that's what God gives us in this passage. But the pain this passage deals with is not that of a needle, but that of persecution (the opposition Christians experience because they are Christian).

And we need this reassurance, because I suspect many of us think of persecution the way my kids think about immunisations. We're not all that familiar with it, we worry about the potential discomfort and pain, and we sense it's coming soon. But, I suspect many of you have already begun to feel the increasing hostility of our society towards Christianity. Steve McAlpine, at the start of his book "being the bad guys," writes these words we might be able to relate to: *I am guessing that in that in the past year or so you've had a conversation with a non-Christian neighbour that didn't go well, or you've overheard a discussion between work colleagues expressing anger over Christian views on a particular issue, or you've read or watched a piece in the media taking potshots at biblical ethics... In the eyes of much of Western Society, Christianity is the bad guy (or at least fast becoming so).*

It's unsettling to think that we are viewed as the bad guys and that things could get worse.

Like a parent to their fearful children, God is giving us reassuring words in 2 Thess 1. Here are the three that I see from this passage:

- God will bring growth through persecution.
- God will deliver justice for persecution.
- God will act in power within context of persecution.

### Context

But before we dive into those three points, I just want to orient our minds to the context of this book. In the first verses we get told about who the author and recipients are of this letter:

*1 Paul, Silas<sup>[a]</sup> and Timothy,*

*To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:*

*<sup>2</sup> Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is the second letter written to the church in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. This church had been planted by the apostle Paul and his missionary team. The Thessalonian Christians had believed Paul's message that God's promised king, Jesus Christ, had died and rose again to bring them forgiveness and eternal life free of charge. They had received Grace from God and peace with God because of their trust in this message (as verse 2 highlights).

But the formation of this new Christian community seriously ruffled some feathers in city of Thessalonica. Like many parts of the world today, the response by others in this city, was one of intense suspicion and hostility. In Acts 17, we read about the earliest days of this church and how an angry mob was whipped up against these new Christians. Some of the believers (including a bloke named Jason) were dragged out of their house, publicly harassed, and falsely accused of being trouble-makers. In Acts 17: 6 the mob shouts:

*“These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”*

The Thessalonian church was familiar with persecution. From its earliest days, it had been battered by a society opposed to its core allegiance to Jesus.

Imagine if that was our church community. Imagine if our community was so hated by our neighbours that some of them thought they were right to bust into our homes, drag us out, and publicly shame us. Imagine coming to church and seeing one or two of your brothers in the auditorium with an arm in a sling or scratches down the side of their faces.

Do you think that kind of pressure might break us? Notice what it does to the Thessalonian church. In God’s grace, persecution doesn’t break them, it appears to make them. Spiritual growth from God comes *through* their persecution.

That is the first reassuring thing God wants us to see about persecution here.

## **1. Growth through persecution.**

Look at verses 3-4 with me:

*<sup>3</sup> We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters,<sup>[b]</sup> and rightly so, because your faith is **growing more and more**, and the love all of you have for one another **is increasing**. <sup>4</sup> Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*

Amidst their persecution these believers aren’t just surviving, they’re thriving. Their faith in Jesus and their love for each other isn’t just hanging in there, but “growing more and more.”

And Paul can’t keep his mouth shut about them when he’s visiting other churches. He sings He says “we boast about you!”

Now don’t misunderstand what Paul is saying.. This isn’t the kind of boasting that seeks to puff up self. Paul isn’t saying, “check out what awesome little disciples I’ve created through my powerful ministry!” His is a boasting in *God’s* work, a thankful recognition of what truly is wonderful fruit in the lives of these believers. That’s why speaks of “always” thanking God for them in verse 3.

It’s a bit like if you had a particular teenager in your youth group bible study who you know was getting viciously bullied for her faith at school. But who you also knew was trusting in Jesus, sharing her faith and love others in your study... That’s a believer worth boasting about. You’d want to share of her faithfulness with the other leaders in the team debrief at the end of the night... (hopefully) not to brag about your own influence in her life, but to give glory to what God is doing in her through her trials. Paul’s words in verse 4 remind us that is right to give God thanks and boast about His work, when we see it on display.

But Paul is not just praising God for the growth He brings despite persecution. He is praising God for the way He brings growth *through* persecution. That's what I think verse 5 is getting at:

<sup>5</sup> *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.*

The increasing faith and love of the Thessalonian believers is "evidence" (an example) of the way God, in His sovereign control over all things (the literal wording is "righteous judgment", uses something bad to bring about something good for His people. God uses their persecution to produce in them lives that are fit the king and kingdom they already belong to through faith in Jesus. It's another way of speaking about God's role in making us more and more like Jesus.

Why are these verses reassuring to us? Because they tell us that when persecution comes, God can use it for our good. We shouldn't see it as punishment. We shouldn't see it as pointless. It is a means by which God grows us in our faith and love.

This is why the author of Hebrews actually places persecutions in the category of "God's fatherly discipline (which is not so much punishment but *teaching or training*)."

<sup>7</sup> *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?*

<sup>11</sup> *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

There is purpose in the pain.

Through the pain of persecution, God brings about the gain of faith and love.

And this is what you will often find among the persecuted church of today. This photo is from around 2017. It shows an Egyptian church meeting in the desert after their building was attacked and destroyed. One Egyptian church leader at this time commented on the way God was strengthening the church in his country through the persecution they were experiencing:

*"What we are seeing happening in the Middle East is **bringing us all together**. We churches do not have the luxury of staying separate any more. We have realised that what we have in common far exceeds what separates us." – Egyptian church leader.*

Persecution has a way of stopping us from majoring on the minors (squabbling and dividing over things that of secondary importance to the gospel). By God's grace it can be used to help his people major on the majors: faith in Christ crucified and risen. Love for one another

And this is true for us too. The increasing social pressure we are feeling now can grow us. Think about it, opposition leads us to ask good questions that God uses to strengthen our faith. Questions like:

- Is Jesus worth being marginalized by my people I thought were my friends?
- Should I really keep following Him if it means this much pain and isolation?

I remember wrestling with those couple of question in the last two years of high school, when I felt mocked and marginalised from my friends who simply didn't get the whole Jesus thing. But it was those two years where I fully owned my faith – where I really decided, yes, Jesus *is* worth it. He really did die and rise again. He really does bring forgiveness and eternal – and that's more precious than the approval of my class mates. He's not going to remain someone I have a loose and comfortable connection to... He's going to be someone I *will* tether myself to, whatever the cost. I did not like those two years of high school... But I've since come to thank God for them, because it was through that pain, that God brought gain. If you are going through something similar, hang in there. Keep persevering. God can use this time for your good, and his glory.

## 2. Justice for Persecution (vv.6-10)

Second, this passage reassures us that God's will bring justice in the face of persecution. Justice in the face of wrongdoing is a good thing. It's something that the human heart desperately longs for.

In fact, you can't get through most days without being faced with some level of wrong you desperately want righted! We feel it in the little ways:

- You get cut off on the way to work, you want the driver to get booked. You want justice!
- You see someone unfairly slandered on FB, you want the moderator to do something. You want justice!

And haven't we seen it in the bigger ways too this week?

- A little girl abducted and kept from her parents for 18 days. As a father of three little girls, boy do I want to see some justice. I suspect our whole nation does.

If we care about wrong-doing, would we expect our loving creator to care any less?

In fact, the truth is that God cares, much, much more. And, when it comes to the wrong-doing of persecution, God is wanting His people to know... He is reassuring you, that justice will be done. Verse 6:

*<sup>6</sup> God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you <sup>7</sup> and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.*

You might be uncomfortable with the language of "pay back". But all it means, is that God will give back to people what is due them for their sin. Which, again, is just and right. It would be wrong for sin to go unpunished. And I suspect, for the Christian who has actually experienced genuine suffering for their faith in Jesus – the idea that their persecutor will be held to account *is* a great comfort – particularly, where there has been a lack of justice for what has happened to them.

- Think about Jason, the Thessalonian believer, who was dragged out of his house and publicly shamed before his neighbours and the local magistrate! You think he's going to shy away from God's words here? I think God's justice would have been a precious comfort to Jason.
- Or what about the little church in a Nigeria which the BF reported was attacked by bandits who killed one believer and injured another. The idea of God's justice would surely be precious to the grieving family members.

God's justice is good and right and it is part of God's reassuring word to believers who have felt or are preparing to feel the pain of persecution.

And notice that it is Jesus himself is the One who will deliver this justice on the day of His return. Verse 7:

*This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. <sup>8</sup> He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might*

The prophet Isaiah had spoken of a terrifying day of judgment in which "the LORD" would come with chariots of fire and "bring down his anger with fury" on his foes (Is 66:15). Paul is basically saying, that Jesus is the Lord of that prophecy. *He* is the Lord, who will come in awesome and overwhelming judgment. He is the one who will shut out of God's eternal glory those who have mock, harassed attacked his people, and who have refused to repent.

This is God saying to a people who feel they are the powerless punching bags, that He has their back. They have a Saviour who will come to their aid, bring them justice, and deal with those who trouble them.

I joined a soccer league when I first moved to Melbourne. And during one match, a guy from the other side fell over during a contest for the ball between him and I. He immediately assumed I had deliberately tripped him, and in a rage, he jumped up and with both hands pushed me in the chest hungry for an altercation. Now, I was even more weak and scrawny than I am now, so I didn't stand a chance, but that didn't matter, because right then, in that moment of hostility, one of my teams mates, who was much taller, bigger and stronger than the both of us jumped in, grabbed this guy by the scruff of the neck and said "you have a go at him, you have a go at me!" And with that he threw him to the side. It was a glorious moment.

For persecuted Christians, God is reassuring them that they have an even greater saviour in Jesus. Not only has he died for their sins, risen again to life, but will return again, and come to their aid on the last day. He will pick up those who have troubled them (v.6) and throw them down in judgment. However powerful and scary the persecutors might be they will be nothing compared to the glory of Jesus might, on the day (v.10):

*<sup>10</sup> on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

The day of Jesus return will be a day of justice. Divine retribution for persecutors. But divine relief for the persecuted (v.7). Some of you are feeling the relief of exams being over and holidays beginning. When Jesus returns, persecuted believers will feel an infinitely greater relief from their angst and struggle. Their time of suffering will have ended. No more pain. No more injustice. On the day of Christ, you will marvel (v.10) at what Jesus the almighty judge will do for His persecuted people.

I think the truth of God's justice helps us in a couple of ways.

It reassures us that all the awful things we read about in Christian publications like the Barnabas fund, or open doors, will be brought to account. We can read about the situations of our persecuted brothers and sisters OS, and know the Lord Jesus will bring their persecutors to account if they remain defiant against the God's call to repent.

But God's justice, also frees us from being eaten alive by frustration and bitterness when opposition comes to us. God's justice will deal with the sins committed against you because of your faith too.

- He will see when you lose your job or are unfairly reprimanded because of your commitment to Jesus. He will bring justice.
- He will see it when you're the target of unjustified slander on social media because of your faith. People may hide behind their keyboard. But God sees them and He will bring justice.
- He will see it when we are publicly shamed or hauled before the authorities for teaching what the bible says about sexuality and gender.

Those who oppress you for your faith will have to answer to God.

You see, while it *is* appropriate to seek human justice where you can for such things, the problem of human justice is that it is human... It can miss things. It doesn't always get it right. But in such cases we don't lose hope because *God* is just – and you can entrust those painful experiences into *His* hands.

This is why Paul tells the Roman believers

<sup>19</sup> *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.* <sup>20</sup> *On the contrary:*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.*

What kind of crazy person could actually love their enemy like that!? It's the person, who knows they don't have to avenge themselves. It's the person who is convinced that God is just.

Be reassured, God will bring justice for the persecution experienced by His people.

### **3. Power in persecution (vv.11-12)**

Third, this passage reassures us with the power of God to help us in the face of persecution.

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the hard-line Islamic regime has been incredible hostile to Christians in that country. Missionaries were kicked out, evangelism outlawed, bibles banned, pastors harassed and killed. In the eyes of the world, the Iranian church looked as though it would simply wither and die.

Yet, according to the research organisation, *Operation World*, the opposite has happened. In the last 20 years more Iranians have become Christian than in the previous 13 centuries. In 1979 there were an estimated 500 Christians from a Muslim background in Iran. Today there are hundreds of thousands – some estimating more than 1 million. Iran is believed to have the fastest growing evangelical movement in the world. How do you explain this?

Paul's answer would surely be, "God's power."

It is God who has made their seemingly insignificant gospel endeavours fruitful. He has done it by his power, for the good of his people and the glory of Jesus. That's what Paul is convinced God can do for every church. And that's why he prays for God to keep doing it among the Thessalonians. Verse 11:

<sup>11</sup> *With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that **by his power** he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.* <sup>12</sup> *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.<sup>[c]</sup>*

Paul prays here that God's power would continue to *work in* the Thessalonians ('making them worthy of their calling into God's Kingdom). Paul knows only God can bring about that fruit of faith and love, making his people more like Jesus. So he prays.

But he also prays that God's power would continue to work *through* the Thessalonians – asking that God would make their desires to do good to others come to fruition. That God would bless all their deeds prompted by faith – that their kids club ministry would reach community families. That their neighbours would come to CE. That their food bank ministry would provide needed help and be attractive to outsiders.

And we actually see God answering this prayer in 2 Corinthians 8. There Paul speaks of the Grace God gave to the Macedonian churches (which included the Thessalonians), who despite their own poverty and persecution, had committed themselves to take up a collection for other needy churches. 2 Cor 8:

<sup>8</sup> *And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.* <sup>2</sup> *In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme*

*poverty welled up in rich generosity. <sup>3</sup> For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.*

That's the sort of desire for goodness, the sort of deed prompted by faith that brings glory to Jesus. The world around the Thessalonian church may have been hostile to them, but the world would have a hard time bad mouthing the one who would call his followers to exhibit such sacrificial love. And an even harder time, when they realise that the one who calls for sacrificial love, showed it powerfully in his own death for sinners.

The Thessalonian church is a wonderful example of what God's power can do in and through his persecuted people for the glory of Jesus.

I think it will be easy for us to become pessimistic about our future as a church as we increasingly feel the pressure and hostility either from the world around us. It will be easy to simply turn in on ourselves and withdraw from evangelistic endeavours and community engagement because we think the world want's nothing to do with us. But this is showing us we have a God who is powerful and who can do wonderful things among us and our community in the worst of circumstances.

God has often surprised me by all the different people he has brought from our community into our CE course. One lady, last year, made it clear that she had significant issues with the church and it's teaching, and warned me from the outset that she would be "a hard nut to crack." But, when I asked her at the end of the course where she felt she was at with God, she said "I'm still working out where I'm at with God, but I love what I see in Jesus." God is powerful to win people over with the compelling truth of Jesus – even in hostile times. And if you're not a Christian, I hope you would also come to see how compelling Jesus is too. We've heard tonight that he will come to us a second time as the great judge. But, don't forget the wonderful truth that he came first to be your great saviour. The one who loved you by dying for you.

But, God's power should lead the rest of us to pray like Paul does here. Asking that God would work in and through us for the glory of Jesus. Because we know He can bring our deeds prompted by faith to fruition, we should ask him to.

We need those prayers now. We will definitely need them as the pressure against us increases.

### **Conclusion.**

I don't know about you, but I've found the past two years of this pandemic so draining. We have endured 262 days (or nearly nine months) of lockdown across this time. I don't know about you, but I don't really feel up for more hostility from the world right now..

Most of us I think, are loathe to contemplate the idea coming out of a decreasing pandemic only to be confronted with increasing persecution. That thought is overwhelming for most of us. And in reality, we don't know what our future looks like as Christians, going forward. But if it does involve increased pressure as many assume it will, we need not fear. We need not be too overwhelmed. For God's word has given us the reassurance we need.

- He will grow us through persecution. It won't be pointless.
- He will deliver justice for persecution. It won't go unpunished.
- His power will help us in persecution. It won't stop Jesus being glorified in our lives and through our deeds.

Let's pray.