

Forever: Maintaining an Eternal Perspective

Sermon 2: Suffering for 'Forever'

Passages: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20
Matthew 24:9-14

Did you know that today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church? Did you know that, today, thousands of churches all around the world will be specifically focusing their thoughts and prayers on the plight of our Christian brothers and sisters who live in places where there is limited freedom to believe in Jesus?

Let me give you a few facts about Persecution

1. Christians are the largest identifiable group in the world today who are denied their basic human rights simply because of who they are.
2. Many experts suggest that more than 200 million people in over 60 nations face violent persecution or detention because of their identity as Christians.
3. For many Christians, persecution is such a part of their daily life that it hardly dawns on them to tell the world. They don't know who to tell anyway and there are only so many organizations with limited staff to seek them out. Even then, many are nervous about sharing what they know for fear of retribution.
4. Numerous Christians are martyred each year, although it is difficult, if not impossible, to say for certain how many. Sadly, most martyrs suffer and die anonymously, unknown and forgotten, and their deaths unrecorded except in heaven.

Now, tell me...Why are Christians being persecuted today? Are they doing something wrong? Are they being bad neighbours, or bad citizens? Aren't Christians paying their taxes? Aren't they loving and being kind to others? What is it that causes Christians around the world to be persecuted?

The answer is the Gospel!

Turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 2:1-4 (read)

The word Gospel literally means "Good News". And so, when the Apostle Paul and his companions (Silas and Timothy) travelled around the northern part of Greece,

they went from town to town preaching the “Good News of Jesus Christ”. The problem, however, was that this “Good News” got them into lots of trouble. You see, the people who were listening to them preach obviously didn’t think that their message was all that Good! Indeed, Paul says in verse 2 that he and his fellow workers were insulted and severely beaten in Philippi. In fact, they were even going to be thrown into prison. Why? For preaching the Gospel!

Nevertheless, this wasn’t going to stop them! Despite the persecution, these three men continued to preach the Gospel wherever they went. And so, they came to Thessalonica, where, once again, they ran into trouble.

Listen again to verse 2-- “With the help of God, we dared to tell you this Gospel in spite of strong opposition.” These three men knew the cost of preaching the Gospel! And what’s more, they made it clear to the new believers in Thessalonica that they would suffer too! Look at verse 14—“For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered...!!”

Don’t ever think Paul, Silas and Timothy were unprepared for persecution. And don’t ever think that the new Christians in Thessalonica were taken by surprise! No...for Jesus had warned His disciples that persecution would happen! Back in Matthew 24, Jesus told them: “...you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.” Jesus was saying that His word...His message of salvation...His Good News... was going to stir up trouble wherever His disciples went...in every generation...to the end of the world!

But let’s go back to my earlier question: Why? Why are Christians being persecuted? Why does the Gospel stir up so much trouble? What is it about the ‘Good News’ that causes so many people to become violently opposed to it? What is it about the Gospel that brings persecution against the church???

In John 15:18-20, Jesus gives us one very important clue: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

Jesus makes a very interesting point here: He's telling His disciples that the Gospel has a supernatural power to change people. It makes us new creatures in Christ. Indeed, as we receive the Good News, we gradually become people who are no longer "of this world." The Gospel recreates us by transforming our inner being. Over time, it makes us more and more like Jesus. For those of us who believe this Good News, we live with our eyes on eternity. Although we live in the 'Now', our hearts are rooted in 'Forever'. We are being transformed by the future reality of Jesus the Lord. With our eyes fixed on the future, we are "being changed (says Paul) from one degree of glory to another"!

How does this process of transformation work? It all revolves around Jesus. You see, three days after Jesus was crucified and buried, He rose from the dead. Later on, He was taken up to heaven and seated at the Father's right hand. From that moment on, Jesus became the Lord over a new creation! It's what the Bible calls the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. Today, His Kingdom is infiltrating the entire earth. For the past 2000 years, Jesus has been gradually becoming the Lord over all things. And one day, perhaps soon, all things will finally be put in subjection to His Lordship! On that day, the Bible says that "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil 2:10-11)

Of course, that is still to come in the future. And yet, it is already happening now. Why? Because Jesus is already sitting on His royal throne. He is already Lord! And even though not everyone knows it, or can see it or accept it, that doesn't change the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord!

Now, what this means is that, every time we proclaim the Gospel, we are proclaiming this reality! We are proclaiming to everyone that, because Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now seated in heaven, a new creation has begun and Jesus is the Lord of all things! That being true, you might as well give in to His Lordship now! Indeed, every time we share the Gospel, we are saying to people, "Why are you waiting? One day, you will be bowing your knee before our glorious, generous, forgiving and beautiful Lord Jesus; so why not do it now?" That's the Gospel.

But, tell me, what usually happens when we tell people about this future reality that is breaking in to the present?? What happens when we tell people this Good

News of the Kingdom of God and the fact that Jesus is Lord? And what do they say when we tell them that, although it may now seem obvious right now, He will eventually rule over all people, nations, races, tribes and tongues?

I'll tell you what happens-- We have tension! ... a tension between the 'Now' and the 'Not Yet'. You see, the present world (the world focused on the 'Now') can't see what we see. They don't feel what we feel. They don't know the glory of Jesus Christ. That's why people may react negatively to us—they may even hate us! Because we see the present through the eyes of the future, and because we live focused on the future, it means that we often have little in common with those whose eyes are fixed on today. Those whose eyes are fixed on today can only think about today-- getting more, consuming more, eating more, having more. But those whose eyes are fixed on 'forever' think about the more important issues of serving others in joy, peace, generosity, kindness and love.

It's no wonder why Jesus said, "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." We don't belong to the world- we belong to Jesus and to His future Kingdom.

Of course, this doesn't mean that no one will want to listen to our message! The Gospel is Good News for anyone who wants to be changed or transformed. It is Good News for anyone who longs for something beyond the present. It is Good News for the depressed, the discontented, the lonely and the afraid. The Gospel is Good News for the poor and the weak and the suffering and the hopeless. It is Good News for the orphan and the widow and the alien and the refugee. Why? Because when the hope of the future breaks into your miserable present, it comes to you in power...the power to lift you out of your despair and point you to Jesus, the coming Lord! It is Good News because it brings you hope and a reason to live. It gives you confidence about the future because it declares the amazing truth that Jesus is coming back to be Lord over all things.

If, on the other hand, you are happy and satisfied with your life, and proud of your achievements; and if you have stored up a lot of treasures on this earth; and if you have built a nice kingdom for yourself with all the latest distractions to make life easy for yourself and yourself alone; then you will find the Gospel message quite disturbing! For in the end, the Gospel speaks of another world

than yours... and another Kingdom that will, one day, rule over yours. Indeed, it promises that your little kingdom will fall; Your power will fail; Your money will rot; Your schemes will be revealed; Your ways will come to an end. Because Jesus is the Lord and He is returning.

Of course, this is the message that gets us, Christians, into trouble! You see, it's the message from a future world...a world that is gradually breaking into the present and will not stop until all things have been brought back into subjection to Jesus, the King! Listen to the way that Paul speaks about that great day in 1 Corinthians 15:24-25. "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

This King and His ever-increasing Kingdom are the focus of the Good News!

As I conclude, turn with me to the last four verses of today's chapter. (Read 1 Thess. 2:17-20)

There are two wonderful gifts that Jesus wants to give to us to help us stay focused on the future, even despite persecution:

1. The present unity of our fellowship in the sufferings of Christ. Paul, Silas and Timothy could not wait to be together again with their brothers and sisters in Christ in Thessalonica. There is an intensity of love and fellowship between all those who share in the intense fellowship of Christ's sufferings.
2. The future hope of perfect fellowship around Jesus. These verses finish on the high note of 'forever'! There is a hope that looks beyond the present troubles and focuses on being forever in the presence of Jesus, the Lord. It is the same hope that causes us to pray; "Our Father in heaven... Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!"

Friends, today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Let's pray for our brothers and sisters around the world, standing together as One Body, united in One Faith, proclaiming the One Gospel of the present and coming Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

