

"The Witness of Suffering" – 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

That verse really embodies what the Westminster Shorter Catechism calls the "Chief Aim of Man". In other words, it is the primary duty of every Christian – To glorify God. Enjoying Him forever comes afterwards.

Too often we humans view scripture through the lens of "What's in it for me?" We treat God as if He exists to serve us. I think that is the chief error of the prosperity preachers. It is where the Word of Faith movement begins to go off the rails. The result is one serious train wreck.

God did not create us so that He could serve us; He created us to serve Him. Our duty is to glorify God. The very last thing Jesus said to His disciples before He ascended into heaven was ...

*... you shall be witnesses **to Me** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)*

Meditate on that for a moment. Jesus didn't even mention what's in it for us. He told us that we are to ...

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:19-20)

We glorify God by seeking to know Him, renewing our minds through the study of His word. We glorify God by constantly acknowledging Him, understanding that every good and perfect gift comes down from Him. We glorify God by loving Him, because we know He first loved us. We glorify God by serving Him because it is a privilege to work for the advancement of His kingdom. We glorify God by demonstrating our confidence in His promises, no matter how well or how poorly things are going for us at the moment. We glorify God by displaying supernatural peace in all circumstances, delighting in Him, despite the trials we will inevitably face as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Yes, it is our duty to glorify God even in our suffering. When we are faithful to that call, it is a powerful witness.

I would suggest that prosperity preachers like Joel Osteen don't have a particularly powerful witness for Jesus. His gospel is a false gospel in that it is man-centered. The dude is rich ... really rich. His gospel says that if you follow me and buy my books you too can be really, really rich, and healthy, and successful, and have perfect kids and live life as an absolute champion. You know, life seems to be going well for Mr. Osteen, but it is because he's on top of the pyramid scheme. People flock to his teaching because they want some of the filthy lucre, but he is not making disciples for Jesus. He's making disciples for a false messiah. I wonder, where will their faith be when poverty overtakes them, or their health fails, or their children go down the wrong road?

By contrast, consider a poor, destitute, faithful soul, perhaps one who is dying from some dread disease. Perhaps he lives in an area of the world where persecution is rampant. When that suffering servant smiles and says: "*Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.*" (Job 13:15) folks want to know the reason for the hope that resides within. That person is a powerful witness for Jesus.

That, my friends, is the **witness of suffering** and it is powerful. Nobody wants to suffer. I don't want to suffer. I know you don't want to suffer either, but a reward is waiting for those who can say with Paul:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

As we continue our journey through the First Letter to the Thessalonians, I want to remind you that Paul has been commending them. He was really excited to hear how they were progressing as Christians. The last verse we visited last week says:

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Their behavior furnished evidence that the message had been received. Their faith was changing their lifestyle. And they were holding fast to their faith despite the fact that they were suffering.

Let's continue reading, beginning with verse 14:

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16)

It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica. There was a ton of opposition. Unbelieving Jews hated the fact that Paul preached to the Gentiles. And converted Jews were banished from the Synagogue and branded as traitors to Israel. Jason, in whose house the developing church met, was grabbed by a mob and brought up on charges of sedition. Pagans hated the fact that Christians rejected their gods and abandoned the prevailing cultural norms. Paul, if you remember, had to run for his life after preaching Jesus there. So, for these reasons, Paul writes:

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, (1 Thessalonians 2:14)

Paul is comparing their situation with that of the Church in Jerusalem. It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Jerusalem, either. It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Judea. And you know what? It is not easy to be a Christian in much of the world today.

As long as things are going well, a lot of people will identify themselves as Christians. And despite our penchant for whining, things are going pretty well for Christians in this country. So a lot of folks claim to be Christians. According to a recent poll conducted by ABC News, 83 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians. A Barna Research poll published in September of this year puts that number at 73%. Of course, if you drill down in the data, you find out that a much, much smaller percentage actually believes what the Bible teaches about Jesus Christ or salvation. 23% are identified as Bible-minded. Only 7% are identified as evangelical. But I wonder, what would those numbers be if being a Christian in America cost something?

When you are willing to stand up in the face of opposition and boldly proclaim your trust in Jesus Christ, it confirms your salvation. Many of us won't even proclaim our faith in Jesus when there is no opposition at all! Friends, that should not be the case! You know what Jesus said:

For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38)

I do not want Jesus to be ashamed of me! I don't want Him to be ashamed of you, either.

The persecution we face in this country is extremely mild. You might face a little ridicule. Your employer might not let you post a Bible quote in your cubicle at work. You might be denied the right to publicly pray. In very rare instances, you might even be fired for continually sharing your faith at work; it happens. But that is nothing compared to what our brothers and sisters face across the world.

If Christianity were against the law, would you go underground? If our government were to ban Christianity, would you still profess your faith in Jesus?

A number of years ago, we had a very bad situation come to light at Machias Community Church. I don't want to go into detail, but as a result, we began to require everyone who worked with children to have a background check done. I well remember one fellow – and he certainly is a Christian brother – object strenuously to this. His issue: "I don't want the government knowing I'm a Christian."

What?

Interestingly, he worked for Boeing at the time and he had to have regular background checks for that. So, he didn't mind the government knowing where he worked. He had a concealed carry permit, so he didn't mind the government knowing he was a gun owner. But he was concerned about the government knowing he was a Christian.

I don't think we want to hide the fact of our faith from anybody. We have 2000 years of testimony from Christian martyrs who would not deny Jesus Christ in the face of the most heinous persecution. Their number continues to grow. Theirs is the witness of suffering. Suffering for Jesus ought to be a badge of honor. Suffering for Jesus confirms saving faith.

The second point I want to make is, when you suffer for your faith, those who persecute you will be judged by Almighty God. You will be vindicated. We need to keep that firmly in mind, because it helps us have the right attitude toward those who are giving us a hard time.

Remember what Jesus said:

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

It is a promise of vindication. The suffering you endure in this life is only for a short time. It may seem to be endless as you go through it. And listen, it's okay to cry out for God's mercy. Don't ever hesitate to share your suffering with Jesus. He understands. In fact, no human being has ever suffered to the degree that our Savior suffered. But no matter how horrible your situation might become, your suffering will only be for a season.

But the suffering reserved for your unrepentant persecutors will last forever.

Look again at our text, would you? You might notice that there are only two sentences here, but the second one is a doozy!

- i. *For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16)*

Our Lord Jesus Christ was killed by sinful men, yet it served the purpose of God, because by His stripes we are healed. And if they persecuted your Lord, why would you expect them to treat you any differently.

He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. (John 1:11)

That is such a tragic sentence! Jesus came to earth to offer forgiveness and redemption from sin, but the vast majority of humanity will not receive it ... will not receive Him.

Have you received Him? Will you receive Him?

If you have received Jesus Christ, trusting in Him alone for salvation, you can expect a certain amount of persecution in this world. Jesus said:

Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (John 15:20)

This principle is illustrated by the experience of Christians in Thessalonica. The worst offenders were religious Jews. In their blindness, they were persecuting their own Messiah. Tragically, it was consistent with their legacy. They had a history of killing God's messengers. Jesus even pronounced a curse on them:

Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. (Matthew 23:34-35)

Religious folks have always been the worst persecutors of the true Church. In Thessalonica, leaders of the Synagogue forbade Paul from preaching Christ to the Gentiles. They were responsible for forcing him to leave town. They continued to cause grief for those who were saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

If persecutors fail to repent, they will spend eternity in Hell. It is a promise from the inerrant Word of God: wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. *Telos* (τέλος), in the Greek. The word means "to the end" It is inevitable and will be consummated at a point in time.

Understanding this should change our attitude toward any persecutors who come our way. We don't need to vindicate ourselves.

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. (Romans 12:19)

Always remember what Jesus taught us:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, (Matthew 5:44)

Jesus practiced what He preached! Remember what He said as they were crucifying Him?

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." (Luke 23:34)

And Steven, the first Christian martyr followed Jesus' example as they were stoning him to death. Remember what he said?

Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60)

So, this morning, I have a message for the persecutor and for the persecutee. (I know that's not actually a word, but it serves my purpose.) This passage speaks to those who suffer and also to those who cause others to suffer. You need to listen up, whether you a persecutor, persecutee, or both.

If you have ever caused anyone to suffer, or if you are causing someone to suffer right now, know that your judgment is inevitable. And don't stand on your Church membership! The worst persecutors of the faith have always been religious folks. If that is you, you need to repent and turn to Jesus Christ because every sin will be judged and the wages of sin is death. (Romans 3:23) If you are a persecutor, stop it! Confess and ask for forgiveness.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

By the way, if you have never trusted Jesus for salvation, you are persecuting Him in a most heinous way. He died for you. He paid the death penalty so you would not have to spend eternity in hell. He loves you that much. If you refuse the offer of salvation, you are pounding the nails into His hands and feet all over again. All I can say is, please, repent, and turn to the Lord.

Finally, I want to speak to those of you who are suffering. It might not be suffering from persecution. It might be the result of a health issue. It might be the result of a family issue. Maybe a dear friend has let you down. Maybe you just feel tired and discouraged.

If this is you, cling to Jesus. Embrace the promises that are contained in this Bible. And know you can be a powerful witness for Jesus Christ when the world sees your peace and your joy in the face of great tribulation.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6-9)