

A Persecuted Church

by Keith Malcomson

This sermon is a powerful message about the importance of enduring persecution as a church, highlighting the need to stand firm in faith, love, and patience amidst trials. The Thessalonian church serves as an example of evangelism during persecution, with a focus on the hope of Christ's return and God's righteous judgment on persecutors.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 2:16, 1 Thessalonians 3:5, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 2 Thessalonians 1:5, 2 Thessalonians 1:10

Topics: "Endurance in Persecution", "Hope in Christ's Return"

Description

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Transcript

Praise God. I want you to turn with me to 1 Thessalonians and chapter 1. I'm going to read from verse 1 to verse 10. And for my message this morning, I could read any chapter out of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

I could read from any portion of it. This morning, I'm going to give you an overview of these two letters because it is so vital to the message I have. You know that over a period of 10 messages, this is part 10, we have been dealing with the 21st century church.

The first message we dealt with was a message for the hour about not neglecting our fellowship and together. That is in the context of this hour, the last hour, a prophetic hour. Of course, it's for all nations, all generations, at all time, all Christians.

But that command to not forsake and to watch over it and be careful is specifically given to you. You are a unique generation. I hope that my preaching, my exhortation makes you aware that you are living at an utterly extraordinary hour in Bible prophecy.

Many have lived for 1900 years talking, preaching, praying about these things, but you are actually seeing it come to pass. And one of the vital commands of Scripture is do not neglect gathering together. It is more important now than a year ago, five years ago, or 10 years ago.

And yet there's a tendency that things pull you away from it. Please respect the gathering in the house of God. This is a church, not a charity.

It's not just to get together. It's not a bunch of friends. It is a church and a church is like nothing else.

The regulations come from God. And this message, it might be my last or maybe we're only halfway through. Ask God, he'll tell you.

But I believe we're at the end here and I want to preach you part 10 of this series, A Persecuted Church. I believe the church of the 21st century is, has been, will be a persecuted church. Do you realize there are more martyrs now for the faith, for the name of Christ, than any other decade in church history? Do you realize that? More are dying, suffering, in prison, having all their means of living taken away from them.

If you are not suffering that, you are rare. You are unusual. There are more martyrs than any other decade in 2000 years.

It's amazing. So turning to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, reading the first 10 verses, A Persecuted Church. Paul and Silvanus and Timotheus under the church of the Thessalonians, which is in God the father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace be unto you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God always for you, make a mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our father, knowing brethren beloved your election of God. For our gospel came unto you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance.

As you know what manner of men we were among you for your sake, and ye became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Ghost, so that ye were in samples to all that believe in Macedonia and Ikea. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Ikea, but also in every place your faith to God word is spread abroad, so that we need not speak anything. For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living God and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

Let's pray. Father, we realize that we're living in an utterly unique hour in the 21st century. More are dying for the faith, suffered for the faith.

Lord God, this Bible is more persecuted than in any other generation. Lord God, we've been chosen to live here in this hour and this time. Now in the Western world, we are beginning to see the rise of radicalism, a radicalism that's invading the legal system, the government, our schools, all of the education system, a radicalism that is set against the Lord Jesus Christ.

We know that this is an hour in which the real Christian is going to be utterly out of step with this world, with society, with legislation. Lord God, with powers, with culture. Lord God, we need your power.

Lord God, we need the power of your Holy Spirit. We need your grace and your mercy and your love and your comfort to establish us, to settle us, to make us strong and courageous, to stand in an hour where most, even in the church, are moving and conforming and being made in the image of this world's likeness. We pray for the power of God to conform us to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we pray, oh God, restore the truth of your word to the church that you have called us to suffer, to endure troubles. Lord God, to stand in the midst of opposition and we pray that you reveal your Son in the midst of this, in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

My message, a persecuted church. The 21st century church is going to be a persecuted church. It has been.

It is right now in our world and it's going to be. It's not getting lesser. The tide is rising.

It's going to intensify across the Western world. It is going to intensify in our schools. Your children are going to have to grow up with this intensifying and utter opposition against morality, sanity and the truth of the gospel.

You are embarking on a dangerous age. The church of the 21st century is a persecuted church. And I can assure you if you don't stir up hostility in the days to come, you probably aren't born again.

It's because there's something wrong with you. Because this society is so changing that it hates the name of Christ. It hates conviction.

It doesn't allow you to hold personal convictions. It's not a case of we're in their face. They will come looking for you like they did in Sodom and Gomorrah.

I actually believe that the church of this art, the real church, is a persecuted church. In fact, I believe the church has always been a persecuted church. I believe that we, the church of the 21st century, especially in the Western world, have lost the doctrine of suffering.

And someday we're going to teach it and preach it. We do not believe that we should suffer. We do not believe it's God's will to suffer.

We do not believe it's a desirous thing to suffer. We do not believe that we should be allowed to suffer. Do you get it? And I assure you, we live in an hour where if you suffer or lose a friend or get defriended on Facebook, you actually go, God, why is this happening to me? It is such a terrible thing to be defriended on Facebook that you think you're being persecuted.

There's one of the major churches in America recently, the leadership of it, they come out and said, we believe that this is an hour that we're about to embark on a terrible hour of persecution. We're gonna lose our charity status and our tax-free status and we'll lose our building. And I thought when I heard him say this, I thought, God help you if you think that's persecution.

If you think you're being persecuted because the government doesn't give you financial benefits, you know nothing about persecution. I've got volumes on my shelf from France and Scotland and other nations, thick volumes from the 17th, 16th, 15th centuries of men being martyred for the faith. What is wrong with the church in this hour? You can't even get people to come to church.

They've got a cold. They don't feel like it. They're lazy.

They can't be bothered. What is wrong with the church of this hour? All through the ages, the real church has been martyred for the faith. They have shed their blood.

They laid down their life. I'm talking about those saved six months, born again six months. I read a testimony in France, in Paris, when the Catholic Inquisition was interrogating the born again Christians in Paris.

And there was an old godly mother whose family had come to the Lord. And what they'd done with the son was they brought him to the house, to her house outside. And she's in the house and it's night time.

And outside at her front door, he's only saved six months. They tortured him all through the night. And I won't go into the details.

But that mother had a lesson, the voice of her poor son who loved Jesus, who wouldn't deny him, who wouldn't turn away from the faith, who knows that he's going to die before the night's out. And that poor mother is in that house saying, I will not deny Christ. I will not denounce.

I will not turn back to the mass and to reverence to Mary. You think that you make a bold stand and say, I'm against Rome. You don't even know the cost of this gospel.

Would you make the same stand? Would you be as militant if it meant the loss of your life? Anyone could say, I don't agree with this or that. But I'm talking about a real church through the ages. The real church is a persecuted church.

Look at the first church, the first history book, the first chapter of church history, the book of Acts. When you go to Acts, let me just show you for a second as we come into this message. I want to show you opposition, persecution, affliction, tribulation flowing through the book of Acts.

Do you know what chapters in the book of Acts you find it in? You find the church persecuted in Acts 4, Acts 5, Acts 7, Acts 8, Acts 9, Acts 12, Acts 13, Acts 14, Acts 16, Acts 17, Acts 18, Acts 19, and then finally from chapter 21 to 23, you have persecution. Do you see this is the first church, not just the first church of Jerusalem, but wherever the gospel spread, wherever you find the church, anywhere from Jerusalem to Rome, the church was a persecuted church. Maybe it was imprisonment.

Maybe it was weapons. Maybe it was a riot. Maybe it was an assault on your life or martyrdom.

Maybe it was the removal of your goods or having to flee the city that was your city that you grew up in and that you raised your children in. We read in Acts chapter 8 about the first church at Jerusalem and the first, the great persecution, sorry, the second great persecution breaking out there in verse 1. It says Saul of Tarsus was consenting unto the death of Stephen and at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem. A great men are dying.

Losing tax status is not persecution. I know it is to a certain extent, but I want to tell you the first church at the beginning of church history, it actually come under a great persecution beginning with Stephen being stoned to death by a man who's going to become a great teacher and apostle. Give us persecutors like that again if they get born again.

But listen to what happened to church in Jerusalem. It says, and they were all scattered abroad through out the regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles. You know I always told the guys at the beginning of this church that a day's going to come where I'll leave you all here and go down to Tipperary or somewhere else.

If revival breaks out here and we explode and we're touching the city, I'm going to go, my job's finished. I'm going to Tipperary or I'm going to Ennis or I'll, all of you stay here. You don't send out your young preachers.

You don't send out the inexperienced. You get your most experienced man, the most able man, the most mature man, and you send him out to start all over again. And that's what, but look at Acts chapter eight.

You don't get that. You get persecution coming and all the mothers, the fathers, the young people, the normal Christians, all of them got scattered. All of them fled the city for fear of their life.

The entire church was scattered. Maybe that will happen in Limerick. All of you will have to move out into Ireland.

You're going to be persecuted. You'll have to move out into all of Munster or maybe into the north or maybe into England. And you know what? I'll just stay here and say, I need to preach and build a church again.

And we'll just start all over again. And we'll raise up a new church. Saints, this is where the church actually began.

In Acts chapter 14, we read about Saul who's now converted, traveling with Barnabas, traveling from town to town. And it says they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith. And that we must, through much tribulation, enter into the kingdom of God.

These are new churches, new Christians, new assemblies raised up. And these two great apostles, men of God, they went through preaching and maybe a few weeks, several months later, they come back through. And you know what they're preaching? Continue in the faith.

You must, through much tribulation, much tribulation, great persecution, enter the kingdom of God. God has not promised you won't suffer. God has not promised you won't be killed for the faith.

We are scared of this sort of thing coming to our world. The church has always thrived in this climate. The church has always moved out and began in this climate.

The new Christians in that hour were taught from day one, you will suffer much tribulation, maybe from family, maybe from authorities, maybe from other religions, maybe from the people on the street, but don't worry about it. That's normal to the Christian life. You thrive in the midst of that.

You grow in the midst of that. You walk with God. You evangelize in the midst of that.

And we see these two great apostles teaching, you must, through much tribulation, enter the kingdom of God. But let me bring you to Thessalonians, this beautiful, beautiful church. In the past two days, I've gone through 1 and 2 Thessalonians several times and portions of it tens and tens of times, just thinking, meditating, spending time upon it.

And Thessalonians, these two letters are remarkable. This church is a beautiful church. And Paul expresses in these letters his affection for the church in an unbelievable way.

And you see their affection for him in an unbelievable way. This is a dynamic church and we're going to deal with it this morning. I've got six points for you concerning persecution and the church at Thessalonica.

But let me just tell you how the church was raised up. First of all, Paul arrived in Thessalonica in Acts chapter 17 and verse 1. Verse 1 to verse 9 gives you the history of the birth of the church at Thessalonica. It was around about the year AD 50.

And this was his second missionary journey. With him was Silas. He was a prophet sent to help him and was his co-laborer stepping out on the second missionary journey.

On the way, he recruited young Timothy to be again part of his apostolic band. And again, we read that he picked up Luke, the physician or doctor on the way. So what a team he has as he approaches Thessalonica.

You'll remember that Paul actually was seeking the will of God on the second missionary journey. He tried to go into Asia. The spirit of God would not allow him.

He tried to go into Bithynia and he wasn't able to get in there. So God was directing him and he's trying to find the will of God. And eventually he is led to a certain spot where the Lord in the middle of night gives him a vision of a man of Macedonia.

The gospel has never gone into Macedonia. It's a part of Europe today, but it had not received the gospel. And here he gets a vision to go to travel, to get on a boat, to leave the land that he's on and to travel into this new region, into the Grecian pagan society of Europe.

And it was that vision that led him there. We read that when he come to Thessalonica, it was a capital of Macedonia. It had a population of maybe a hundred thousand people.

It was the trade center of the entire region of Macedonia. It was the buy-in selling place, the business heart of the entire region. And that's where Paul made a beeline for.

He is a remarkable man. We read that when he reached Thessalonica, he preached three weeks in the synagogue as was his custom. In the book of Acts, when you see Paul going into the synagogue on the Sabbath, that's a Saturday.

It was always for evangelism, never for a church assembly. Every time through the book of Acts, you read about Paul preaching on the Sabbath day. It's always to preach the gospel to the Jew.

It's not a church service. The Sabbath was not for the New Testament believer. We read later that they gathered on the Lord's day or the first day of the week.

But here's Paul for three weeks, he preaches to the Jews in the city of Thessalonica. That's where he started to evangelize. That's where he went and preached first.

And it says in Acts 17.3, opening up in a legend from the word of God. Sorry, it says before that, that he reasoned with them out of the scriptures, out of the Old Testament. He reasoned with them.

He talked with them, opening up in the legend that Christ must needs have suffered and risen again from the dead. And that this Jesus whom I preach unto you is the Christ. Then it goes further and says, and some of them believed and consorted with Paul and Silas.

Some of the Jews believed, only some, not many. But it says, and of the devout Greeks, a great multitude believed and of the chief women, not a few. So here you have Paul at the beginning, a few Jews, many of the Gentiles, a great crowd and believe.

What a beginning for a church. When you see a campaign, an evangelistic mission, here's Silas, here's Timothy, here's Paul. And you have this great multitude coming in, but yet the Jews are remaining unconvinced.

They're not moved by this at all. They're against it. And there's some very important women in the city.

Well, what happens? The Jews react. I'm talking about a persecuted church. The church is beginning.

These are new converts. They've only just believed in Christ. They're listening to the great apostle.

They're beginning to gather as a new church in this city. What happened? But the Jews which believed not moved with envy or jealousy. See, religious envy is terrible.

It is terrible. It is destructive. These Jews took onto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort and gathered a company and set the entire city on an uproar and assaulted the house of Jason and sought to bring them out to the people.

And when they found them, they drew Jason and certain brethren onto the rulers of the city crying, these men have turned the world upside down and they've come hither also whom Jason had received. And these two contrary to the decrees of Caesar saying that there is another king, one Jesus. Do you see what happens? The church is only birth and already the entire city is in an uproar.

And you know what? They're bringing the law to bear. They're saying this breaks the law of our nation. They're beginning to stir up with wicked evil men and they're challenging it.

And this is where the church actually begins. Now, Paul actually stayed in Thessaloniki for a certain period of time. We then he stayed there for a time.

Some people think he only stayed several weeks. I do not believe that. And this is the reasons.

And the small letter of Philippians chapter 4, 16, it says that you Philippi, you know where he'd been before coming to Thessaloniki? Philippi. He birthed the church there. Do you know why he left Philippi? Do you remember? He was thrown in prison.

He caused trouble and the legal representatives of the city of Philippi asked, we want you to leave. Please get out of our city. So he left the church behind and he came to Thessaloniki.

So he came there with marks on his body. Remember he was beaten and thrown in prison. Remember the jailer who then got converted in the middle of the night, brought him out and began to minister to the wounds on his body.

So when Paul comes to this new church, this new city, he's got marks upon him. He's been beaten. His back is still raw from all of those beatings.

He's been in jail. He's had chains on his hand and his arms. What a terrible thing.

But here at Thessaloniki, he says to the, he writes to the church at Philippi and he says, you know what? When I was in Thessaloniki, you sent once and again unto my necessities. You small church sent finance for me. Here's another thing that it says in this letter.

Paul says twice in the two letters to the Thessalonians that he labored with his hands night and day. He worked as a tent maker. During the time he stayed there, he said, I didn't take a penny.

I didn't take anything off you. You did not finance me. Philippi sent a couple of gifts at least.

But he said, I labored night and day in order to preach, to raise up this church in Thessaloniki amidst all of the opposition. So he's not only a preacher, an apostle, and this is what an apostle is. He labored with his hands.

He stayed there long enough that he had a work. So you're talking about a period of time Paul is in Thessaloniki. And he says in the second letter, neither did we eat any man's bread for naught, but we wrought with labor and travail night and day that we might not be chargeable to any of you.

Two young preachers so-called came into this church once and they're told all about the charismatic apostles in America that they had worked with. And they sat down and I said, do you know the marks of a real apostle? And they said, tell us. I said, I'll tell you a real New Testament apostle.

And I started to describe Paul. He won't take a penny. He'll work with his hands.

He'll evangelize. After a short time, their jaw dropped and said, maybe we haven't seen any true New Testament apostles. This is the mark of this man of God.

Then we read that things got so bad in this city that he was sent off to go to Berea the next time. More trouble came there. He raised up another church in Berea, but Jews from Thessaloniki followed him, stirred up the Jews in Berea.

And there was more trouble for Paul. After that, he left and went to Athens. And he was so worried about the church at Thessaloniki.

How are they going to survive? Will they stand? Has my labor been in vain? That's the attitude of an apostle. You think that an apostle sent by God who had visions of heaven would never worry? He'd say, no, I know everything's going to be okay. The church will prosper.

I don't need to worry. You know what he's worrying? Will they come through? Will they stand with us? Are they going to endure? There's no Calvinism in this, I assure you. Here's an apostle who knows the power of the gospel, knows the assurance of God.

But he says in Athens, I'm worried about them. He sends young Timothy back and says, you go comfort them, encourage them, come back and tell me. Well, when Timothy come back, Paul had moved on to Corinth and it was at Corinth he writes two letters to this church at Thessaloniki.

Silas and Timothy deliver the letters, maybe six months into the church. First and second Thessalonians. If you read it and say, I don't understand it.

God help you. Because these two letters were written to Christians, not longer than six months saved. Read the depth of the letter and how much he says, I taught you when I was with you.

I taught you this. You know this. You know what withholdeth.

No one in the 21st century seems to know in the church, they all debate it. But he says, you Thessalonians say six months who I only got to teach over a short period amidst terrible persecution. You know all these things.

You know what I taught you when I was with you. And so he sent them a letter and Paul may be returned to them in Acts chapter 20. That's a foundation.

I've got six points for you about a persecuted church at Thessaloniki. And I believe it's got a message for this hour. I've had to watch my entire life.

Christians saying God would never let us suffer. It's not God's will for me to suffer. What's happening that I'm suffering.

This is normal biblical Christianity. If you don't believe this, then you don't know your Bible. My first point here as we go to Thessalonians and I'm giving you an overview of the two letters, I've showed you the second.

My first point, persecution is within God's will. That's my first point. If you don't hear the others, make sure you get that and you can come back and catch the others at another point.

But you've got to get this. Look with me at chapter one, sorry, the first letter, chapter three and verse three. It says that no man should be moved by these afflictions.

Do you realize in these two letters, Paul uses various words. He uses the word afflictions. That's the Greek word for tribulation, which means terrible, terrible trials that almost bring you to your knees.

Throughout the letter he uses other words like you're being troubled, those that trouble you. He speaks of persecution, which means people are chasing you, designed to destroy you. I mean, they're militant, usually religious persecution.

He talks throughout these two letters about your suffering. In other words, you're experiencing pain, feelings, thoughts, turmoil, anxiety. That's what suffering is.

And finally he talks about your tribulations. All of these things Paul talks about. You, this young church at Thessalonica, I'm so worried about you.

Do you still believe in God? Do you still love Jesus Christ? Are you holding to the word of God? Are you living a right life? And so he writes these two letters. But look at this first thing. Persecution is within God's will.

And so he says that no man should be moved by these afflictions. Can I tell you, whatever your affliction is, do not be moved by it. Whether it's a wife at home who's seriously ill, or a marriage situation, or something at work, or something financial, or someone who hates your guts, do not be moved.

Just because your mind and your emotions and your feelings and your worries are moved, does not, do you know what it means to not be moved? Stay in the same direction. Do you know what I can feel like when I walk into the house of God? Do you know what it takes for me to get into a prayer meeting or to come and preach to you in these days? Do you understand? I would not like you to see my feelings and

emotions, but I am not moved. You see, that's what you see.

You see a preacher who is unmoved by all of these things. That doesn't mean I don't have feelings. That doesn't mean my heart isn't broken in two.

That doesn't mean I have various thoughts. But you know what? I have learned not to be moved by afflictions. No matter what happens, it's not going to change my direction.

I want to tell you, persecution is God's will. It says, for you yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. Underline that.

You young Christians at Thessalonica, you know that we are appointed to this. Do you know that this morning? Because these young Christians knew that God had appointed them to afflictions and persecution and opposition. That's remarkable.

The word appointed means you have been set to this. The verb means to lie down flat. It is an action of lying down flat there, ready, in a certain position.

It means that God has put the church at Thessalonica into this situation. It means to be put in the situation. It is out of your hands.

God gives you over to this. He has appointed you. You know this, don't you? Paul's writing to them saying, you already know this.

You believe this. You understand this, that God has appointed you. It's not accidental.

It's not out of his will. You shouldn't be saying, oh God, why is this terrible persecution happening? Don't you know that suffering can be in the will of God? Don't you know it can be in the divine plan and purpose of God? Listen to what Peter, the apostle says in 1 Peter chapter 4, 19. Wherefore, let them that suffer, talk about suffering, according to the will of God, commit the keeping of their souls to him in well-doing, as unto a faithful creator.

It speaks about suffering according to the will of God. And that means two things. It means that suffering is in the will of God.

God can have in his plan. And I'm not talking about illness. I'm not talking about bowing down and accepting things to happen to you.

I don't mean that at all. But I'm saying God allows suffering. Some of you need a bit of suffering.

And some of us here, I won't mention any names, I've had so much that they don't know how to live without suffering. But you know what? Paul is making it very clear in this first letter. You yourselves know that you've been appointed to this.

For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation. Don't get this mixed up with the great tribulation that comes at the end of time. Some people put all tribulation at the end and say, oh, we are not going to suffer the great tribulation.

Really, most of them don't believe in suffering tribulation at all. The early church had to enter into the kingdom of God through much tribulation. Here in this verse, Paul is telling these young Christians, you

know, when we are with you, we taught you this, we preach this.

You're a young church and we preach, you know what? It is God's will. God sets Christians to tribulation or to persecution or to suffering. God actually has a plan in all of this.

You don't need to like it. You know, there's lots of things my mom gave me for illness when I was a kid. She says, you're not going to like this, but it's good for you.

I always knew that things that were good for you usually did not taste good. That's what you grew up with. And I'm telling you, suffering is not nice.

You're not meant to like it. You're not meant to just embrace it. I don't like it when Christians think, yeah, bring it on.

You don't know what you're talking about. That's anti-biblical. I do not want to be persecuted.

I do not want to suffer. You don't need to pray for it. I was once in a prayer meeting in Scotland and this young, zealous, unfired believer, and he started praying the prayer meeting, Lord, send us persecution.

There were no amens. You know, two or three of us got up and kicked the guy. It's the only time we all burst out laughing and said, someone stop his mouth now.

And I informed him later, you know, in the Bible, you never get anyone praying for persecution. Do you know why? It's in the will of God. It's in the plan of God.

God knows how much you can take. God knows that some of you, it would destroy you. So he withholds it.

He protects you. He guards you. Some of us, like me, I feel like I've been dragged through a hedge backwards, betrayed so many times that I think there's more Judas in the church than normal believers.

But do you know what? What I know is that's in the will of God. It was so extreme. I went, this is God.

It's not just the devil. You see, he's saying here, I taught you. I taught in the church.

We ought to teach the church again that we are appointed there unto. And he says, even as it came to pass, didn't it come to pass? I warned you. I taught you before it happened.

Now it happens. Don't be surprised. Now I'm writing to you and you're in persecution.

But you know what? Don't get alarmed by that. That's the first thing. Persecution is within the will of God.

If it should suddenly break out on a massive way and you'd be caught up in it in the future, don't think what's happening. It's in the will of God. You don't bow to it, submit to it, yield to it.

You don't pray for it. I once had a friend and he liked to preach in the street and he was fanatical about persecution. So he got combats on.

He had this truck and he'd go out in the forest. He was a crackpot. He's not a friend anymore.

He was a friend. I was a friend of him. He wasn't a friend of me.

But I went, this guy's a maniac and a reproach on the gospel. Yes, go to high street and preach the gospel. But when you get combats on and go out into the forest and you're going covert, I get very worried.

I'm not talking about, I'm not a part of that. Do you know this church in Thessalonica? Do you know what it done in the midst of persecution? It went to high street and preach. It evangelized home to home.

It was out there in the marketplace. This is their city. They stayed there.

Second of all, examples in persecution. Look at chapter one and verse six. Paul's speaking to them.

He says, and ye became followers of us. The word follower there, this is used all through these two letters and all through Paul's letters. He said, you became followers of me.

We're an example to you. You ought to follow our footsteps. The word followers means an imitator.

It's the Greek word for mimic. You're mimicking someone or you're copying someone or you try to stand in their footprints. You see that with the wee boy trying to follow his dad and in the snow.

And he stands in the footprints of his father. He's imitating his father's prints. And here, Paul is saying you, the church at Thessalonica have become followers or imitators of us.

The apostles of Silas, of Timothy, of me, of Luke, you become followers of us. What's he talking about here? What is the context? Paul goes on, followers of us and of the Lord having received the word, the word of God, the gospel in much affliction. Notice here that this church followed Paul and Jesus amidst much affliction.

They received the word of God. What does it mean to become a follower of Paul? He operated in affliction. He was surrounded by it.

Every time he went to, he either had a revival, a riot or both. He didn't have anything else. You know, I get worried when I don't either have everyone against me or everyone for me.

I don't know what in between is to be quite honest in my lifetime. I've had one or the other and I don't know how to have it any other way. Do you know what? I would rather have everyone against me and be in the will of God than to have everyone for me and be out of the will of God.

But he's saying to this church, you followed us because you received the word of God in affliction. You believe the gospel. You believe that we're going to walk with Christ in the midst of affliction.

Do you know what you became? You became a follower of me and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he also says you received the word of God with joy in the Holy Ghost. Don't believe that sorrow and suffering and persecution means you're sad all the time.

That is not true. Do you realize you could suffer physically? You could suffer in prison. Do you remember what Paul and Silas were doing in Philippi just before coming here? Do you remember what they done? They got to midnight.

Their backs are bleeding. The chains, the rusty hygienic chains, can you imagine? They'll be getting the wet wipes out and the sprays and making sure these old rusty iron clinking chains are very hygienic.

These men's bodies have been bruised and whipped and battered and they're sitting and they've got chains of other men who bled before them.

But Paul says you've received the word of God amidst much tribulation with joy. Do you know what Paul and Silas started to do at midnight? They began to sing and there was an earthquake and the prison opened and there was great conversions. Saints of God, you can be under terrible persecution.

You can have affliction. You can be facing things you don't understand, but you can get the joy of the Lord. You can get the joy of the Lord.

It's real. We're talking about reality here. You know when you're persecuted, that's real.

You're not playing games anymore and you can have the joy of the Holy Ghost. The joy of the Holy Ghost isn't rolling on the floor laughing. The joy of the Holy Ghost is that you can sing in a prison cell.

That's the joy of the Lord. That you can rise up in the darkest hour and say, I will praise you. I will worship you.

I will adore you. And so in this verse, in reference to following, Paul and Jesus is in concern and affliction. That's the context.

Jesus suffered in enduring to the point of the cross. Paul suffered. Then in chapter 2, 14, it says, for ye brethren became followers of the churches of God in Judea.

You, the Gentile church, often that pagan nation, you become followers of the churches in Judea. What does he mean? All those scattered small churches across from Jerusalem that's scattered all through Judea. He says, you actually began to follow them.

Do you know what? We're meant to follow the example of Paul. Are you someone who imitates Paul? Who says, I'm going to follow the example of Paul. Just like when Paul was bruised and whipped and imprisoned and shipwrecked.

Did he give up and say, God, you've left me. I didn't come into the gospel for this. It's meant to be nice and roses and blessing and everyone loving me and benefits.

And you're meant to bless my finance. Some of you say, I'm not going to see you next week at this rate. So they become followers of the church of God in Judea or in Christ Jesus.

For ye also suffered like things of your own countrymen, just like them. Even as they have of the Jews, they were persecuted by the Jews. Now you're being persecuted here who both killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets and a persecuted us.

And they pleased not God and are contrary to all men. So we see that suffering persecution is within God's will. We also see the example of persecution.

Here's an entire church. They had examples, Jesus, Paul, and all the early churches in Judea. They looked back and said, here is an example.

That's why I love to read these testimonies, the Scottish Covenanters and the French Huguenots and all of the rest in between. And I read of their courage. Six month old Christians.

They believed in Christ, they're young believers and yet they valiantly laid down their life. They preached the gospel. They sang Psalms as they died and went into the presence of God.

Where is the church today? A lazy, ignorant, careless. You don't know what I'm going through. Tell me about it.

Tell me your troubles. Oh, I'm feeling really lousy. Okay.

Are you going to imitate Paul? Are you saying that your situation is worse than Paul? All of your problems and all of your trials and all of your sorry stories and all of the thoughts that dominate your mind. And you're going, you know what? My life is so much harder than Paul and then Jesus who got cut off at 33. Then all the early churches that lost everything and parents were separated.

Are you an imitator of them? Third of all, godly character and persecution. It says in 1 Thessalonians 1 and 16, and ye became followers of us and of the Lord having received the word of God in much affliction with joy of the Holy Ghost. That's character.

I'm talking about a certain type of people. What do Christians look like when they're persecuted? You could actually begin to think they're doer. They're sad.

They're depressed. They're hopeless. They want to commit suicide.

I never heard of a real Christian persecuted 25 years in a prison who committed suicide. Never, never. They're taken away from family, denied liberties.

They have their bones broken. They're tortured. They're deprived of sleep.

Never did they commit suicide. They're fighting for life. I'm talking about the character, the personality, what God does in the heart, what actually oozes out.

When you get squeezed, we're going to find out what is in you. The real man's going to come out in persecution and affliction and under suffering. We see who you are.

You ought to look at me at my lowest point, my most pressurized point, the time when everything is heavy upon me. Look at Keith Malcolmson at that point. You're going to begin to see this.

And so this church, when they're afflicted receiving the word of God, there's a joy there. They're persecuted, but there is a joy. Our 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 and 4, it says so, that we ourselves glory in the churches of God for your patience.

This is the mark of the Christians at Thessalonica. What were they marked by? Patience. They're persecuted, but they have patience.

Do you know what patience means? It means you hold up, you control yourself, your emotions, your thoughts, your feelings, your actions, your words. You control yourself. You're a patient person, means you stay in your place.

I feel like I'm cracking. I feel like I'm going to break. I feel like I have to move.

I feel like I can't do this. Have patience. Do you know every Christian goes through that? This preacher does.

Do you think I'm immune? But patience is stand your ground. Don't be moved. Keep going forward.

That's the character of a Christian, persecution all around you. What is the character of a Christian in persecution? To have patience. And he says, and faith.

Look at them. They've got joy. They've got patience.

They've got faith. I'm trusting the Lord. Do you understand everything that's happening to you? No, I don't.

Has God spoken to you and revealed everything? No, he hasn't. But you know what? I have faith. I have a trust, a confidence.

I lean on him. He is my foundation. That is trust.

Show me faith when you cannot see or hear or feel. That's faith. If you're moved around, that's not faith.

Real faith actually says when I cannot see, I cannot hear, I cannot touch, I just trust him. And it says in all of your persecutions and tribulations that you endure. It's in the midst of trouble, persecution, people pursuing you to destroy you.

What are you doing? I'm standing. I'm standing. I'm unmoved by these things.

I'm going forward. This is the character of the Thessalonian Christians of this church. Do you know what they're saying? All of this is around them.

And they're saying, we're standing. I believe they stood with the joy of God and with faith in their heart and with patience. And they said, we're going forward.

We're not going back. We're actually going forward. It says in 1 Thessalonians 3 and 2 that you are fellow labors in the gospel of Christ with us.

And we brought on to you the glad tidings about your faith and charity. Charity is another mark. What is charity? Love and action.

You don't know what people are. You know, most people in persecution get better. They've done this to me.

And they're thinking they become unforgiven and go, why is this happening? God, why are you allowing this to happen? Why did you put me in this particular situation? And you know what? They become better. Do you know what the Thessalonians, they actually were marked by faith and charity. Love began to grow.

We read this in 2 Thessalonians 1 and 3 that their faith and charity grew. It abounded. It moved forward.

It's not enough to love one another. Does your love abound to one another? I don't even know what that fully means. I've asked the Lord for about 20 years now.

What does abounding love really mean? What does it look like? Maybe one of these days I'll stand up and say, I finally discovered this. I know what it says. I know what I want.

I'm praying for it. But what does it mean for my love to abound towards you, the church? I really want to discover this. As you begin to see the character of the church here, no fornication.

They're being persecuted and he says, make sure you're not fornicating sleeping around. He says in the midst of all this terrible trouble, what will we get together with all the bad Jews out there who haven't been faithful in church? Because at least we believe in Jesus. Do you know what he says amidst this persecution? He says, make sure you're separate from all those Christians in the city who walk disorderly.

Make sure you're not in fellowship with them. Oh, but Lord, we're in persecution. We just all unite.

Not according to this. The character of a real Christian actually is, is to say, do not walk with men who are disorderly. Don't walk with men.

Haven't we seen it? Haven't we seen them come in through here? They're disorderly. You're not to fellowship with them. If we put people out of this church, if we've separated, you're, you're actually going against this church and against the word of God.

If you're in fellowship with them, or if you have a cup of tea with them, or if you stand and waste time with them, or if you invite them into your home, you've got a problem with God. There's so much when we begin to look at the character of the Thessalonians. It's fascinating what I'm telling you.

I've never heard this in my life that amidst persecution, you must not be in fellowship with disorderly Christians. Have you heard that before? And yet here it's so obvious. He's teaching the church that are suffering.

Point four, evangelism and persecution. What are you going to do in persecution? Well, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to, I'm going out into the wilderness. I'm going to buy a house.

I'm going to have a hidey hole and I'm going to go out there. I'm going to preserve my life. I need to think of my children.

I don't want to be in prison. Then you don't know anything about this Bible. Thessalonians, what did you do in persecution? Well, that's my fourth point, evangelism during persecution.

Look at chapter one, verse seven, so that you were in samples. Oh no, look at them. They have become the examples now.

They are the actual examples. It's no longer Paul being the example or Silas or the churches. All of a sudden the apostle Paul, sorry, all of a sudden the church at Thessalonica, it becomes the example.

And Paul says here in chapter one, verse seven, that you, the church at Thessalonica were an example to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. You and this church have become an example. You now are someone who can set an example for everyone else, including this church.

Something has happened within you that you began to evangelize the entire community. Look what it says in the next verse. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God is spread abroad so that we need not speak anything.

Paul is saying here, here's a church under persecution. They have suddenly become an example. An example of what? Of the word of God sounding out.

They're not hiding from persecution. They haven't moved cities. They're not locked away preserving their own life.

They're not thinking of their own finance or their own home or their own safety. Do you know what? Right in the midst of the worst persecution that that church is suffering under, you know what they're doing? Out from them, the word of God sounded out into the villages, into the surrounding towns, into the entire entirety of Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God word is spread abroad so that we need not speak anything. Do you know your church at Thessalonica have become an example, not just in countries and around you, but to distant nations right across the Roman empire.

Paul, the apostle who traveled the entire empire, he said everyone is speaking about your church. Everyone is talking about how you stand straight and you endure through persecution by making your stand, by how you conduct yourself in trials and troubles and suffering. See as you stand during that.

Do you know what? You've become an example to many others. They talk about you and say, if they can stand, if they can suffer, if they can keep loving God amidst all of that, then we want to follow your example. What a remarkable thing, this fourth point, evangelism during persecution.

I believe the work of a church amidst persecution is to preach the gospel, to evangelize lost souls, to reach those persecuting you. Aren't you glad Stephen reached Saul of Tarsus, the man that was holding the garments saying, kill him, let him get killed, that was separating parents from children in their homes. Saul of Tarsus broke into homes and dragged families out to go to prison.

You know what? Someone reached them and evangelized them. The Bible says it was like a cow good was pricking his conscience. You know why? Every Christian he encountered, I'm going to cause you to suffer.

I'm throwing you in prison. I'm going to have you stoned to death. You know what they done? Father, forgive him.

Lord, save him. Saul, I love you. You're going to take my life, throw me in a prison.

You know what? I love you with the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a church under persecution. They are evangelizing.

Point five, we have God's righteous judgment on persecutors. Amidst these two letters, Paul makes very clear, I want you, the church, to know you don't lift a hand against your enemies. You're not angry at your enemies.

You don't seek vengeance against your enemies. But I want you to know this, that God is going to pour out judgment. He is going to avenge you.

He is going to judge them. They're not going to get off scot-free. This is so important because when you're persecuted, you need to know that there is a day of judgment.

Look at 1 Thessalonians 2 and 16. It says, "...forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved, to fill up their sins always." So notice already, they were being forbidden to speak. All of this opposition was trying to stop them from evangelizing.

What did they do? They continued evangelizing. "...to fill up their sins always, for wrath is coming upon them to the uttermost." So you see, they're storing up wrath. They're building up their own sin.

Or in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 and verse 5, Paul speaks about the church enduring. Then he says, "...which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God." Now notice this, the fact that they're enduring through persecution, it's a manifest token of God's righteous judgment. That they are persecuting you, you're suffering, and yet you continue to stand and to go forward.

It is a sign or a mark of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God. Since whoever told you that you could go to heaven in a picnic, whoever preached the gospel to the church of this generation, that it's all blessing and prosperity, and that it's not God's will that you suffer, certainly not the Bible. And here Paul is saying that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.

There's something about being persecuted, seeing it as a righteous thing that God will recompense. That means to pay back tribulation to them that trouble you. God will repay them.

No one is going to lie on you who doesn't have that repaid. Nobody's going to steal from you who that isn't going to catch up on them. None of them is going to make your life hard, even legally and with politicians.

God says, I'll repay it, don't you repay it. Don't burn down the Irish Parliament, okay? Don't you go and attack the guards for what they're doing. You know what you do? You go, God is a righteous judge.

He'll judge every man. He is going to recompense. Are you suffering tribulation? God will repay.

I promise you, they won't get off. Just you relax. Let it alone.

And you who are troubled with us, rest when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flame and fire, taking vengeance on them that knew not God and that did not obey the gospel, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power. Now, I want you to see this in this fifth point, and then I'm going to give you my sixth and final one. There is an hour of divine judgment, of vengeance, of wrath.

Anyone who persecutes the church, that inhibits the church, that hinders the church, they're going to come under the wrath of God. Do you realize the Bible teaches an hour of great divine judgment? Hitler didn't escape. You know what witnessing the sinners on the streets, I've often said, I said, so you're an atheist? Yes.

You don't believe there's a judgment? No. You don't believe there's a hell? No. Then I said, your message is unfair.

I said, Hitler has escaped. Mussolini escaped. Stalin escaped.

I said, if there is no God, no judgment day, and no gospel, then this world is stinking rotten because wicked, foul men, they escape. They're the ones with power and money, and they get away free, and nobody's ever caught up with them. And I said, you atheists, I do not believe that.

I believe there is a God in heaven. I believe there is a judgment day. I believe there is a hell.

And you know what all of those men are going to get? I don't get better at them. See those men that have abused children. If I wasn't a Christian, I say this carefully, if I wasn't a Christian, I'd get myself a gun and go looking for child abusers.

I don't know anything more wicked, but you know one thing that keeps me sane with that? Do you know what keeps me sane? I know all of those guys are going to stand in eternal judgment unless they find the Lord Jesus Christ. What a terrible thing. This Bible, and to the church at Thessalonians, I know you're being persecuted.

I know you're suffering. I know you may never be justified in this lifetime, but I want to tell you, it's going to be put right. Listen to the last verse there in chapter 1 verse 10.

When he shall come to be glorified in his saints and to be admired in all them that believe, because our testimony among you was believed in that day. So the same hour that he judges the persecutor, he reveals himself in the glorified saints. He is going to be admired in the saints of God.

What a day when all those that were persecuted, all those that died a martyr's death will rise up and Christ will be revealed in all his glory. Don't you know you'll be rewarded for walking in righteousness? But sixth and lastly, the hope of Christ's return in persecution. When you're being persecuted, suffering, going through things that you don't understand, first and second Thessalonians gives you a message that the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back.

You may suffer in this life. You may never be vindicated. It may seem that you suffered many wrongs that will never get put right in this lifetime.

But these two letters tells the Thessalonians, you know what? It may not all go well with your body or your circumstance, but your great encouragement and comfort is Jesus is coming back again. In one Thessalonians, the message of Christ's return is to comfort them and encourage them. In his second letter, he talks about his coming again in relation to correcting them and teaching them.

When we think of the return of Jesus and end days, these two letters talk much about it. The last hour, the return of Jesus, the catching up of the saints to meet him in the air. There is much talk in this letter and Paul is writing to a persecuted church, a church that is suffering persecution, some that will lose everything in this life.

What does he write about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ? And he says in chapter one, verse nine, for they themselves show of us what manner of entering and we had on to you, how that ye turned to God from idols to serve the living God and to wait for his son from heaven. Every chapter of first and second Thessalonians, bar one, mentions the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. This dominates these two letters that Jesus Christ is coming back again.

In one Thessalonians 4, 16, he says for the Lord himself shall descend from heaven. He himself is going to come back bodily, physically, literally from heaven. In other words, Christ is in heaven now, but there's an hour coming.

He's going to descend from heaven. He's going to move out of heaven. Where is he coming to? It says with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, with the trump of God and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

All the martyrs are going to rise in that hour. Then we which are alive and remain should be caught up together in the clouds. Now Paul wants this understood.

Jesus is coming from heaven. We the saints that are alive at that time are going to be caught up into the clouds. You know what clouds are.

Is anyone confused about clouds? It's talking about clouds. The next statement says to meet the Lord in the air. The clouds is the same as the air.

The word air here is talking about the atmosphere around the earth. It's not talking about the physical landmass under your feet. It's talking about the air, the realm where clouds hang.

That's where the Lord is coming out of heaven to be. And it says we shall be caught up, snatched away, removed, delivered to meet him in the clouds. You are going to meet the Lord in the air.

He is speaking to a church persecuted, in tribulation, having many troubles that are suffering for their faith. And you know, constantly talks about this. I want you to understand what's coming.

The answer, your greatest encouragement for all of your trials in this room, Jesus is going to come again. He's coming back to this earth. He's going to put everything right.

And when he does, he's going to reward you for your faith and your love and your patience and your stickability. Since life is so short, why would you eat Esau's soup? Why would you take Judas's 30 bits of silver? Why would you take these things for a short period of time and be damned for all eternity? Why would you lose your soul all eternity in the presence of God, all eternity with the Lord Jesus Christ and all the saints of all ages? And yet you would destroy that by how you live now. Do you know how you live as a Christian matters? You ought to be, show yourself worthy, how you walk through persecution.

You ought to show yourself worthy. You ought to live in the light of Jesus is coming. I'm not living for today.

I'm not living for my safety, not living for my home, not living for my comfort. What are you living then for? The Lord Jesus Christ, he is coming again. And you who are troubled, rest with us when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with mighty angels, you that are troubled.

For what is our hope, joy, our crown, our rejoicing? Are not even you in the presence of the coming or revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ? When you look at these letters and I'll close with this. You have Paul dealing here with the two churches. The first time he's comforting them, Jesus is coming, you're suffering.

The second letter he writes, he's correcting them. He says there's some amidst, and they're Christians, not the Jews, not the unbeliever. There's some in your midst who says it's already happened.

Jesus already come. He says that's not true. That's deception.

That's deception. He also says there's others who says that the coming of the Lord, 2 Thessalonians chapter two, he gives a warning of things that were going on there. And he says, now I beseech you, brethren, by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and by our gathering together unto him, that you be not soon shaken in mind or troubled neither by spirit or by word nor by letter as from us as that the day of Christ is at hand.

Then he says certain things are going to happen. You know what he is telling that church? Don't think your troubles are going to end tonight. There are certain things that are going to happen.

Don't think that, hey, you know what? It's all over. And you know what the great scholars, they say that these amongst these Thessalonian Christians, there were certain ones who stopped working. The entire last chapter of 2 Thessalonians is mostly to those.

He said, I have commanded you when I was with you that if a man doesn't work, he shouldn't eat. Do you know what happened in this church? They were so consumed with the coming of Jesus. There were those that were so spiritual.

They stopped working and stopped laboring and stopped fixing the windows in the house. And they said, I don't need to bother with the car. Just a planned preacher's license here.

And they said, sure, I don't need to worry about anything. It's all over. I'm just caught up with the Lord and I'm looking for the Lord and I don't need to worry about work.

Do you know what Paul says to a persecuted church? You're being persecuted. He says, if you don't work, you shouldn't eat. And I understand sickness and benefits and various things.

And yet he goes through and he says, you need to beware of people who are busy bodies going from home to home, causing problems in the church and they're not working. Do you know, we've seen it in this church. There's young guys come in here, not even say six months, and they wanted to be in the high street preaching the gospel.

They didn't work a day in their life. When they went to try and do that, they couldn't hold it down for a day. In fact, they come and told us, they said, do you know what? Jesus is coming.

It's more important to preach on the high street, the gospel, than to go and have a nine to five job. They said that to me. Then there's one who said, oh, I'm on state benefits.

Therefore, I don't need a tithe because I deserve this, but I'm not working. Therefore, I don't need to give in to God. I keep it myself to buy new clothes and new mobile.

Do you realize why Paul to a persecuted church and he's warned about Jesus coming and he builds in practical advice? Jesus is coming. You know, amidst eschatology, there's a lot of false teachings and people are saying today, the tribulation has started. The white horse is released.

No, it's not. They're saying the job is the mark of the beast. No, it's not.

You need to be very careful amidst an hour like this amidst an hour of suffering and persecution. People get crazy eschatological ideas about prophecy. They go crazy.

You know what the best thing a young guy getting saved out of this world can do is go become a potato picker or dig trenches, get a good job. You're called to work. If you're a lazy person, you're not a good Christian.

And I understand all the needs for benefits. Boy, I'm talking about the 21st century church. Hope you don't stone me at the end of this morning's message, but I'm telling you about real things here.

And you know what? If you're going to face what's just about to break, we're only seeing the beginning. We need a church like Thessalonica. Look at these six marks.

Beautiful. Paul loved this church and this church loved him in a remarkable way. We want to be a real church, real Christians with real character.

Will you pray with me? Father, we love you. We bless you. We praise you this morning.

Father, who is able for these things? Not me, not us. It's far beyond us, but we know there is a power greater than us. There is the grace of God.

There is the hand of God. There is the working of the Holy Spirit. And father, I pray for everyone this morning in this church.

Oh God, make us to stand up like good soldiers of Jesus Christ to endure hardness as good soldiers, not buckling, not bending, not drawn back. This is going to be our greatest hour, the 21st century church. And father, I pray, will you mantle us? Will you anoint us? Will you prepare us for this last hour that we might glorify Jesus.

And Lord God, we are looking for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, that he is going to come with all the angels of heaven. You say that he's going to bring the saints of previous ages with them, that these angels of fire are going to be revealed. You say in the word of God, that the great men of the earth, the kings of the earth, the businessmen of the world are going to cry for the mountains to fall upon them, to hide them from the wrath of the lamb of God.

Thank you that we're not fearing his wrath this morning, but we love him. We're living for him. We're serving him.

And on that day when we're caught up to meet him, seeing the lamb of God, literally for the first time, what an hour that is going to be. Help us Lord God, to be faithful in Jesus name.

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