

## Suffering

## 1 Thessalonians 2:17—3:5

The past few lessons emphasized the importance of understanding which doctrine we need to follow. Fortunately, Paul has made this abundantly clear by separating out his doctrine (the doctrine of Grace) from the doctrine taught by Jesus and the Apostles (doctrine of the Kingdom). These two doctrines are often ignorantly combined into one great teaching and presented as relevant for today's church. Doing so confuses teaching meant for Israel under the prophetic program with teaching for us today under the Mystery program as revealed through Paul. I believe the biggest danger in doing this is the stunting of our spiritual growth. Our growth is explicitly tied to our understanding of Paul's teachings and a lack of understanding his teaching will keep us from walking in a manner that is worthy of our position in Christ (Colossians 1:9—10). Paul alone tells us how to live (not that we should live separated from the world) by separating ourselves from this world and unto Christ's service. Our sanctification is wrapped up in his teaching alone (Galatians 2:20; 2 Timothy 2:21).

Unfortunately, many Christians confuse teaching meant for Israel as belonging to the Church. For instance, Matthew 6:14 is often mistakenly taken as instruction written for Christians today. Those who do so often live in fear that if they do not forgive others then they themselves will not be forgiven and would therefore lose their salvation. This fear should be real for anyone not properly dividing Scripture as the parable of Matthew 18:23—35 demonstrates. However, knowing this doctrine was not written to the Church, the Body of Christ, the believer will not accept this passage as his or her doctrine but instead will go to Paul's doctrine to find out that we need to forgive because we are already forgiven (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Other doctrines of the Bible that are not relevant for today include sign gifts of the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, etc.), dealing with demon possession, tithing, confession of sins, baptism and the Beatitudes, to name a few. There are certainly some crossover truths, doctrines that are relevant to both Israel and the Body of Christ, but it's illogical to say that because there is some commonality between, for instance, Paul's writings and Peter's writings that we should accept all of Peter's writings as being written directly to us.

**Paul's Desire to return** (verses 17—18)

Paul had been with the Thessalonians for only three Sabbaths (Acts 17:2) before he was forced to leave for Berea by unbelieving Jews (Acts 17:5). During these three short weeks Paul was able to see many Greeks and a few Jews come to believe in Jesus Christ (Acts 17:4). With the city in an uproar over Paul's teaching, the believers smuggled Paul out of Thessalonica at night to a place of safety.

The same thing happened in Berea when unbelieving Jews came looking for him from Thessalonica. They chased him out of Berea and Paul escaped by traveling 300 miles to Athens towards the southern edge of modern day Greece (Acts 17:13—15). After preaching for a while in Athens Paul departed for Corinth, approximately 50 miles west, and stayed there for 18 months (Acts 18:11).

1 Thessalonians 2:17—18 indicate that Paul was there only a short time (three Sabbaths) and that it was his strong desire to see them. He was concerned about their spiritual growth, desiring to have them continue to grow in their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:10). They had a good start but Paul wanted to make sure they would continue to grow without stumbling despite the tribulation they were experiencing at the hands of the unbelieving Jews. As 1 Thessalonians 4:1 states, Paul had already given them instruction from the Lord as to how they should walk to please God. All they needed to do now was to apply that knowledge into everyday activity. This daily walking in step with the Lord in His power is the process of sanctification and defines the Lord's will for any believer today (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

### **Suffering (3:1—5)**

While Paul was ministering in Athens (see Acts 17:15—18:1) he requested for Silas and Timothy to join him. It appears that they met up with Paul and were with him for some time in Athens until Paul strongly desired to see how the Thessalonians were doing spiritually (1 Thessalonians 3:1—2). He sent Timothy back to Thessalonica concerned that the tribulation they were enduring would turn them away from growing spiritually. Paul had already told them that he was going to experience suffering and that they too would be the object of persecution. He was worried that this persecution would cause them to turn away from the Lord. Instead of standing out as strong believers, they would turn to blend in with the world. Persecution is one technique Satan uses to stunt spiritual growth.

Paul warns that we will suffer as Christians (Philippians 1:29; Romans 8:17 “Since” can be used in place of “if”). By believing and following the Lord, he gave up the wealth and prestige of a Pharisee. Paul considered all these worldly things as nothing compared to what eternity holds (Philippians 3:7—11). Although we may never physically suffer for Christ as Paul did (1 Thessalonians 2:2; 2:14; 3:4) there are other ways that the Christian may experience trials and tribulation. We often experience suffering as a result of sin in the world (Romans 8:22). Not only has the whole universe been affected by sin but we may also find the sins of those around us have affected us severely.

We also will suffer along with the sufferings of others (1 Corinthians 12:26). When another believer suffers loss, sickness or various trials, we are to suffer along with him or her since we are all members of each other. When we bear the burden of another’s problem, the weight of that burden is much lessened. Paul speaks of those who shared in his suffering and praised them for their part in his ministry (2 Corinthians 1:3—7). It’s encouraging to those who are involved in ministry to know there are believers uplifting them with words of encouragement and prayer. Being buoyed up by faithful believers much lessens the negative aspects that can be a part of any ministry (Philippians 4:10, 14).

When Paul suffered, he not only was focused on service to Christ but also in serving the believers who made up the body of Christ (Colossians 1:24). Paul, like Peter, James and John, rejoiced at being counted worthy of suffering for Christ (Acts 5:41; Colossians 1:24). Paul knew that when compared to his heavenly future, these suffering were a minor bump in the road (Romans 8:18). Imagine going through the beatings, whippings, shipwrecks, imprisonment, hunger and misery Paul went through to get this doctrine of the Mystery to the world (2 Corinthians 11:23—28; Philippians 4:12). Should we, then, ignore, take lightly or mix it up with doctrine meant for another dispensation? Should we be ashamed to boldly proclaim what Paul taught (Romans 1:16) or hide the parts we are ashamed of in case we might offend someone or scare them from coming to our church? As Paul directs Timothy to “hold fast the sound words” which Paul taught him, we should likewise be willing to suffer as we’re faithfully presenting the doctrine given to Paul directly by Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 1:13). Paul always presented this doctrine in a gentle manner but without compromising its integrity (1 Thess. 2:7; 2 Tim. 2:24; Titus 3:2).

I believe Paul was able to endure much suffering because he was looking beyond the fleeting pain of this world into eternity. Knowing he was doing exactly what God wanted him to do gave him confidence to continue without thought of how it might affect him physically or emotionally. We too are able to transcend these “momentary light afflictions” (2 Corinthians 4:17) by setting our mind in the heavenly places instead of down here in this sin-infused world (Colossians 3:2). We naturally want to set our mind on things of this world but instead we are to set it on things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5). This is a decision we need to consciously make thus giving the Holy Spirit control over our entire being. If we try hard not to sin we are operating in the flesh by trying to clean up the old man of sin. By realizing there is nothing inherently good in the flesh (old nature) and allowing God complete control, we will then be walking in the Spirit and will produce the fruit of the Spirit (Romans 6:12—14; Galatians 5:16—25).

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