

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, October 19, 2011 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study

CONTAGIOUS CHRISTIANS “A Christianity That’s Catching – A Study of 1 Thessalonians”

Leading Out In Your Faith – Part 2 “Contagious Suffering” *Acts 17:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 3:1-8*

Have you ever asked yourself what made the faith of the Apostle Paul so contagious that he was able to reach perhaps thousands for Christ during his ministry, have such tremendous success on his missionary journeys planting churches and establishing works for Christ across the ancient world, and impact his world in such a way that the world to this day still feels the effect of his ministry? What was it?

What do you think? Check yes or no beside each of the following possible reasons for Paul’s contagious faith

(1) Worldly success [] yes [] no

Well, it couldn’t have been worldly success as the world counts it because Paul turned his back on all of his worldly successes on that Damascus Road the day he met Christ.

(2) Religious accomplishment [] yes [] no

Neither could it have been his religious accomplishments and piousness. None could have questioned Paul’s religious astuteness and pious devotion to religious cause. He was praised and rewarded as a leader in the popular religious movement of his day for seeking to protect the religious purity and sanctity of Judaism (by persecuting Christians).

(3) Blessed and carefree Christian life [] yes [] no

It really couldn’t even be attributed to the carefree life of a blessed charismatic Christian leader for Paul found himself more often in trouble for his faith than praised. He spent more time being beaten, chained and imprisoned (suffering) for his faith than being praised for it!

So what was it, do you think? Did it perhaps have something to do with the fact that Paul suffered well, giving evidence how real his faith was that he was willing to suffer for it, that is offered hope beyond this life and the pains that often accompany it.? I think so! The Apostle Paul was one man who knew from the outset of his Christian experience that it was going to include suffering. Notice **Acts 9:10-19**. Did you notice the Lord’s words to Ananias in **verse 16**, **“For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”** Notice verse 3-4 of our passage in **1 Thessalonians 3**, **“...for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For,**

in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer such tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.”(1 Thess. 3:3-4) Do you think the Apostle Paul knew what his life with Christ would be like?

Now think with me about this. If you had just joined a local organization or club (say it’s the Buda Lions Club) and within a few day of joining the club and becoming a member a decree comes down from the Government that all members of the “Buda Lions Club” be arrested and put in prison and if they failed to renounce their membership an execution date would be set. How many Buda Lions Club members do you think would stay Buda Lions Club members? I dare say... NONE! That is something of the dilemma that Paul was facing with this church he has started in Thessalonica and with these new, young believer in this new church. Paul’s faith needed to be contagious enough to keep them committed and faithful to the cause of Christ just like he had been in the face of suffering. Paul’s own suffering couldn’t be allowed to scare them off of Christ. The section of 1 Thessalonians that we are going to zero in on here will help us to better understand our sufferings and teach us how God wants us to respond to them in order that our faith, in answer to the pain and suffering, may be contagious in the world in which we live. After all, the world is looking for help in the midst of pain, and hope in the midst of suffering. If we can offer that kind of help and hope to a hurting world, our faith truly becomes contagious.

I. FIVE MYTHS ON CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

Christians suffer too. There is no getting around that. The healing which never comes despite our prays and pleading with God for His healing... the relationship, which despite everyone’s best efforts just fell apart... the death of a loved one... the financial crisis which seems insurmountable... the impossible job situation... the desperate prayer which seems unanswered... It seems that a lot of Christians want answers to suffering. I’m not too sure that there are many. But sometimes in our search for a reason to that heartfelt “Why?” we can fall prey to one of these five main myths about suffering. Unfortunately, some of them are even put on us by other well-meaning Christians. We must be careful not to buy into these myths about suffering. Have you ever believed any of these myths?

MYTH NUMBER 1: Christians should not go through times of suffering.

Deep down inside, there is a part of us which protests, ‘But I’m a Christian. I love God. He loves me... so bad things shouldn’t happen to me because God protects His children. Right!’ **How would you respond to this?** I believe that God does love His children, and sometimes He does protect us from terrible things. But we still live in a fallen, messed up world, and sometimes Christians get the consequences of that just like everybody else! The Bible actually tells us to expect trials and difficulties.

After all, God doesn’t cause suffering – and would not cause suffering for anyone, Christian or not. Life just happens, and sometimes it hurts. The only place we will ever be safe from suffering is when we get to heaven. Then, the Bible says, ‘He will wipe away every tear’

Scriptural answer – John 16:33 *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

MYTH NUMBER 2: If Christians suffer it is because they have done something wrong.

We hear some say things like, “I must have really done something bad wrong to be going through this. God must be punishing me.” **How would you respond to this?** Is our suffering because we have done something wrong. Not necessarily. Of course there are consequences to wrong doing and sometimes suffering can be the result. God does discipline us for things that we do wrong too, BUT we usually know why it is happening. Right! What sort of parent would shout at their child and send her sobbing to the bedroom without ever telling them what they did wrong? That would be both cruel and pointless. God is a good Father, and never disciplines us without telling us what we have done wrong and what we need to do to put it right.

So if you are suffering the consequences of a broken relationship because of your unkind words, God probably is disciplining you. But if, on the other hand, you are suffering with an illness and have been for a long time and you don’t understand why, that is not discipline. That is living in a fallen, messed up world and God wants to pour out His mercy on you, not His judgment. Furthermore, God can actually use that kind of suffering in the life of a believer as a great witness. If a suffering Saint can exhibit a hope and a peace in the midst of this kind of suffering it can actually be contagious to a hurting world.

Scriptural answer – John 9:1-3 *“As he (Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.’”* **What work to you suppose that is?**

MYTH NUMBER 3: If I had enough faith, this would not be happening to me.

How would you respond to this? “If I had enough faith, this would not be happening to me.” Pure condemnation. Yes, God does look for and reward faith, but suffering comes even to people who have the most enormous faith. Look back at some of the early Christian martyrs: they had the faith to die for what they believed, and they suffered for it. Sometimes we just have to walk through things and our faith will actually increase, even though we don’t immediately see the answers to prayer that we most want.

Remember, *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”* (Hebrews 11:1) We must hold on to our faith through times of suffering, because God does reward faith, but sometimes the reward will come later and for now we just have to keep pressing on through.

Scriptural answer – Hebrews 11:1 *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*

MYTH NUMBER 4: This is pointless.

I’ve heard it said this way, *“None of this makes sense. It just seems so pointless.”* **How would you respond to this?** Pain and suffering rarely does make sense to us in this life and it usually does seem underserved and pointless. Let’s face it, undeserved suffering can just seem pointless, difficult, painful and beyond our understanding. But the problem with this

myth is that it fails to acknowledge that nothing that ever happens in the life of a believer (one of God's children) ever escapes God's eyes. He sees it all. He knows what we are going through. And there is nothing that happens to you or I that God doesn't intend to use for our benefit and His glory. I believe that. Remember the Bible says that we should *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its works so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* Wow! That is difficult to do sometimes.

God does not cause suffering but He will always teach us through it. C.S. Lewis once stated that "Pain is the classroom of God" and there is always more we can learn of Him when we are hurting. We might not want the lessons at the time, but later we will value them because they came at such a cost.

Scriptural answer – James 1:2-4 *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its works so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*

MYTH NUMBER 5: God has abandoned me.

How would you respond to this? God has never abandoned you. Not for a second. He has wept with you, felt your pain, sung His love song over you, been with you every painful, heartbreaking step of the way.

Sometimes, in the darkness, we can feel that God is distant, or uncaring. It is so important in those times to cling to what we know is the truth of who He is, rather than relying on our emotions. We cannot trust our emotions. We can always trust our God. Keep tight hold of your faith in Him. You will not always feel this alone. Remember the words of the writer of Hebrews, who wrote to fellow sufferers in **Hebrews 13:5** reminding them of God's words, *"...God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"*

He has not and never will abandon you. He loves you far too much to ever be able to do that.

Scriptural answer – Hebrews 13:5 *"...God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"*

II. FIVE SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES ON CHRISTIAN SUFFERING (For Review)

The Christian will never have any pain or suffering. Listen, let's be honest... isn't that a great thought? It sure is great, but it's also one other thing... WRONG! Our study began last time with some of the many verses in Scripture that deal with pain. Let's go back over them for our a bit of a review, but this time let's glean some great Scriptural principles that may give us a more realistic and healthier perspective on pain and suffering.

PRINCIPLE 1: We may experience suffering for doing what is right

Scriptural support - Philippians 1:29 – *“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.”* This passage refutes the faulty notion that all suffering is the result of personal sin. On the contrary, we may experience hardship for doing what is right, for carrying out God’s desired will.

PRINCIPLE 2: Part of the Christians life includes suffering

Scriptural support - 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 – *“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carrying around our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”* Here we learn that part of the Christian life includes, affliction, perplexity, persecution, and near-knockout blow. Why? So that the *“life of Jesus... may be manifested in our body.”* Do you know how contagious that can be? These kinds of believers leave the world scratching their heads and wondering, “How do they do that... how do they endure that? How do they get through these seemingly impossible heartache and hardship with such joy, hope and peace? The answer, of course, is JESUS!

PRINCIPLE 3: We should not be surprised when suffering comes

Scriptural support - 1 Peter 4:12-16 – *“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happened to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name* These verses teach us not to be surprised when affliction comes upon us. In fact, if we are suffering because we are Christians, then we should *“rejoice,”* as Peter says, realizing that we *“blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests”* on us. Our difficult, painful times can be evidence that we are being obedient to Christ and His commands. And since we live in a world where there are many people who are still in rebellion against God, it should not surprise us when we are victimized by them simply because we are citizens of God’s everlasting kingdom.

PRINCIPLE 4: Sometimes God uses suffering for the purpose of instructing us more fully in His ways and training us to follow Him more completely

Scriptural support - Psalm 119:67,71,75 – *Psalm 119:67, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your Word.” Psalm 119:71, “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” Psalm 119:75, “I know, O Lord, that Your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.”* Many times God will use the tool of affliction for the purpose of instructing us more fully in His ways and training us to follow Him more completely. It’s difficult when God must make us to “lie down in green pastures” (Psalm 23:2a), but many times there is no better way for Him to gain our attention.

PRINCIPLE 5: Suffering should cause us to take a scrutinizing look at ourselves as we really are

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 – *“Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.”*

Another purpose of adversity is evaluation. Suffering should cause us to take a scrutinizing look at ourselves as we really are. That’s the idea tied up in the use of the Hebrew word translated here as “consider.” Though a self-evaluation will not guarantee what route our future will take, it will help us to understand where we have been and what improvements we can make.

III. A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE IN CHRISTIAN SUFFERING

Building on the foundation we have laid above, let’s consider the Thessalonians’ example of suffering portrayed in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-8. Again, consider the dilemma that Paul was facing with this church he has started in Thessalonica and with these new, young believer in this new church. Paul’s faith needed to be contagious enough to keep them committed and faithful to the cause of Christ in the face of suffering just like he was. That part of his life needed to be contagious. Paul’s own suffering couldn’t be allowed to scare them off of Christ. The section of 1 Thessalonians that we are going to zero in on here will help us to better understand our sufferings and teach us how God wants us to respond to them in order that our faith, in answer to the pain and suffering, may be contagious in the world in which we live. After all, the world is looking for help in the midst of pain, and hope in the midst of suffering. If we can offer that kind of help and hope to a hurting world, our faith truly becomes contagious.

1. CONCERN IN SUFFERING (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, 5) –

We know that at least part of Paul’s reason for writing this letter was to comfort and encourage a persecuted flock... the Thessalonians were that flock. Look back at 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 (READ). Let’s go to Acts 17:1-9 (READ)

(1) **Paul’s Concern** – What happened in and around the Thessalonian Christians during this time that Paul ministered to them?

3 Primary Concerns for the Thessalonian Believers:

1. **Doubt** - When Paul ministered among the Thessalonians, he did so *“in spite of strong opposition...”* (1 Thess. 2:2.) Perhaps some of Paul’s concern for these believers was his own suffering... that somehow his suffering would cause them to doubt not only his validity and the message he had proclaimed to them. Or perhaps that they might doubt whether or not following Christ and being a Christian was worth the suffering. Doubt! Suffering does produce doubt and doubt always cripples our faith.
2. **Discouragement** – When Paul was torn away from their presence (1 Thess. 2:17), a storm of suffering fell upon the Thessalonians whom he had established in the faith (1 Thess. 2:14). Paul was rightly concerned for their well-being in face of these persecutions, but he was also concerned that this wave of suffering that had come on them would discourage them in their own faith. Paul knew that suffering for a believer was inevitable, but he also knew that these new in the faith believers

might not be strong enough to face what was coming and that discouragement would steal their joy and be detrimental to their spiritual growth. Discouragement can cause a believer to lose their joy and certainly it keeps us from the abundant life Jesus came to give us even in the face of difficulties

3. **Denial** - As a consequence all of this Paul was genuinely concerned about how these new Christians were doing through all of this. His biggest concern may well have been that they would abandon the faith altogether and deny Christ and their newfound faith in Him. This would not only have been disastrous for their own faith, but also for the advancement of the Gospel.

Consider this: *Why? What did Paul have to be concerned about? Why would he be concerned about them now in the midst of their suffering? What effects can pain and suffering have on the life of even a seasoned believer?*

- (2) **Paul's Remedy** – Let's think for a minute about what Paul did for the Thessalonian Christians out of concern for them. These may offer us some ideas on we may be assistance to those who may be going through their own trials.

Paul's 2 Part Remedy for the Suffering Thessalonians:

1. **He sent tangible help** – Paul was about “tangible ministry”... hands on help... not just a few token feel good words, but really help. Paul sent Timothy “**to strengthen and encourage you in your faith...**” (1 Thess. 3:2) * *God sends comfort.* The Greek term translated here as “strengthen” means literally “to shore up, to buttress.” So what is Paul saying about Timothy purpose in coming? Timothy was sent to enable the Thessalonians to stand strong against the onslaught of persecution and suffering. **God is faithful to being alongside of us those who will help to bolster our faith when we are going through tough times. That is a promise to those of who may be going through it right now. It is also an encouragement for us to be willing to be somebody's Timothy when they are going through it. Who can you be Timothy to?* The Greek word for “encourage” is often translated “comfort.” It conveys the idea of standing alongside another person in order to put courage into them. **Sometimes our presence is enough to give a struggling the courage and strength to continue on and know that they are not alone in their fight. In this case we can be Timothy to others.* Let God stretch you to be a someone “Timothy” when they are hurting or struggling. Let us use you to establish and encourage another's faith. Just be available.
2. **He sent sustaining hope** – Paul was not about false hopes and dreams, promising that life would get better and their suffering would leave and never come again. He knew better than to hold out a false promise of better days. Paul instead sent Timothy to strengthen and reassure the Thessalonians in their faith. He gave them hope and pointed them to the answer for their struggles. The hope Paul sent the Thessalonian believer was not Timothy and it was not Paul, but God... that is who Timothy came to point them towards. God offers real hope that is able to sustain us through the suffering and heartache of this life as it directs us to an eternal God and hope beyond this world.

Honest Words of Sustaining Hope for Those Who Suffer: Let's be just as honest as Paul and take a reality check about pain and suffering in our own lives. That is truly how we find sustaining hope. Hope comes when we acknowledge these truths. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 3:5, *"For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless."* Okay, here are some honest, realistic words of sustaining hope for those who suffer.

[1] Human strength sometimes isn't enough - The reality is that there is nothing easy about going through times of pain and suffering, and sometimes we can't handle it. I dare say that if we were facing severe persecution for our faith where our the lives of our own family and friends were threatened not to mention our own lives, it truly would be more than most of us could bear. Paul's goal was not to exhort them to gut it out by sheer exertion of willpower. That just wasn't possible and would not have been credible. He knew that would not be enough and that sometimes we just can't go on, on our own. Listen, it is not weakness to acknowledge "I can't handle this." That is truth and reality, and no one knows what we can and can't handle better than God, himself.

[2] God's strength is always enough - Paul's objective was to edify them in the fact that God would see them through this – indeed, it was since God was accomplishing a mighty work in them, they were experiencing the attacks of the enemy. The reality is that God is in control. He knows what He is doing. Our suffering and His children, has not escaped His eye. We may not be able to handle it, but God can handle it and we must let Him. We must lean fully on God's strength. Paul was calling them to stand firm in God's all-sufficient power.

[3] The enemy will tempt you in your suffering – If Satan tempted Jesus when he was suffering (hunger, thirst), he will certainly tempt you when you are struggling. It was for good reason that Paul was concerned that they would yield to their suffering. He knew that such would be Satan's goal and that if they succumbed his work among them would be in vain (1 Thess. 3:5) When God is doing or beginning to do a work you can be certain that the enemy of God, Satan, is close at hand to try to destroy that work. Like Paul, it would be wise for us to follow up on our concerns for the spiritual condition of other believers. All of us are in a spiritual warfare. It rages around us whether we realize it or not, and we cannot be effective in our fight without uniting and helping each other (Ephesians 6:10-20)

2. **TRUTH IN SUFFERING (1 Thessalonians 3:3-4)** – Paul sent Timothy on his mission to the Thessalonians so that none of these new believers would be “unsettled (shaken) by these trials,” according to verse 3 of our passage. Paul believed that affliction need not unsettle God's people. We don't have to be defeated by times of suffering, trial and heartache. How could Paul be so optimistic in the face of suffering?

Because he knew certain things to be true and he has given these to us in God's Word that is always true, for our own help when we suffer.

Truths For Those Suffer:

- (1) **God has shown us how to suffer** – In other words, He has shown us through the examples of Scripture (including His own in Jesus) how to go through suffering. **God will do for us what He did for others who have suffered before us.** Paul had been through times of suffering, hardship and trial before and he had seen God's faithfulness in his life. The same Paul who wrote these words to Thessalonian believers knew from whence he spoke. He had been through it all himself. Paul write in **Philippians 4:11-13**, *"I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him (Christ) who give me strength."* The same God who had seen Paul through, Paul knew, would see the suffering Thessalonians believers through, and He will see us through as well. That is the truth!
- (2) **God has prepared us to suffer** – In other words, He has told in advance that we would suffer. **God never promised a life free of hardship and suffering.** Paul knew, as did the Thessalonians, that Christian are "destined" for suffering and they had been carefully prepared that in reality suffering would come (vv.3-4). We won't always understand it, and certainly it doesn't always make sense, but God can see us through it and He is still in control. God's training program for His children includes hardship and struggle, which I am convinced someday we will better understand. Remember again, Paul's words in **Philippians 1:29**, *"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him."*
- (3) **God can accomplish much in our suffering** – In other words, He actually use our suffering and hardship to accomplish great things in our life as well as in the lives of others. Paul knew that difficulties can smooth out our rough edges as we travel the road toward holy perfection in Christ. Paul writes in **Romans 5:3-4**, *"Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."* And of course we are all familiar these words in **James 1:2-4**, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*

Consider this about our suffering: He destines us for them, but he doesn't just spring them on us. He warns us in advance so that we won't be scandalized and taken off guard by them. Instead, we can prepare ourselves to stand firm through them knowing full well that God is still in control and he has our best interest in mind. Trust! Trust! Trust!

3. **RESPONSE TO SUFFERING (1 Thessalonians 3:6-8)** – When Christians lose their theological moorings or bearing and falter in the face of adversity. As believers, we either face our suffering in the flesh like the world or we can approach our suffering from a Biblical and thoroughly Christian mindset. We are flesh and not react like flesh is difficult if not impossible. Only in Christ can we not have that reaction. That is what makes it so hard. The flesh and world response to suffering can have extremely damaging effects and consequences. **How does the world respond to suffering and why is the response so damaging?**

3 Damaging Responses to Suffering: *(when we fail to apply our theology, Biblical truth, to suffering)*

- (1) **Resentment and bitterness** – First, they harbor resentment toward a former authority figure (ex. Paul, Moses), toward God or toward life and life circumstances.
- (2) **Withdrawal and loneliness** – Second, they isolate themselves from Christian friends from the body of Christ, from those who could strengthen and encourage them.
- (3) **Error and impaired judgment** – Third, they begin to doubt and grow indifferent toward the Biblical instruction they use to embrace. How many times have you seen Christians get bitter, withdraw and then drop out and walk away from what they once believed? It happens.

But the Thessalonian believers managed to withstand falling prey to all three damaging responses. Paul commends them in verse 6-8. Paul tells us how they did it, it what a help this could be to us when we face our trials. **(READ: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8)**

3 Positive Responses to Suffering: *(when we successfully apply or theology [Biblical truth] to suffering)*

- (1) **Refuse to blame** – They refused to blame a former authority or anything else for their suffering (v. 6). They did not falter in their “faith and love,” and they continued to “have pleasant memories” of Paul and his companions.
- (2) **Stay connected** – Stay connected to other believers who can give you mutual support and encouragement in the face of difficult times. These Thessalonian believers desired to maintain close ties with Paul and his associates in ministry (v.6). They longed to see Paul and Timothy as much as Paul and Timothy wanted to get together with the Thessalonians.
- (3) **Keep the faith** - They maintained a firm commitment to spiritual truth (vv.7-8). Paul put it this way in verse 7, “Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.” The Thessalonian believers did not doubt or grow indifferent to the truth they had received from Paul. Instead, they maintained their conviction and found strength in them, which helped to see them through. Because these new believers were able to endure their trials, Paul and his companions could “really live” – that is, they could be encouraged through their own struggles.