

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, September 22, 2021 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study

CATCHING CHRISTIAN: A Study of 1 Thessalonians

“When Your Comfort Zone Gets Squeezed”
1 Thessalonians 3:1-8

“¹Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, ²and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, ³that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. ⁴For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain. ⁶But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you— ⁷therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. ⁸For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. -1 Thessalonians 3:1-8 (NKJV)

“‘Medicine man’ theology tends to crop up frequently around the Body of Christ these days, claiming, ‘Come to Him and your struggles, suffering, trials and problems will vanish... your life will become peaceful.’ Such teaching is faulty.” –Dr. Charles Swindoll

1. **What do you think Dr. Swindoll means by “Medicine Man” Theology? Give examples.** *I think that Dr. Swindoll is talking about the present day preaching that has been popularized by the “Prosperity Preachers” who boldly, though falsely, proclaim that if you just have enough faith you will be rich, blessed, never get sick, never have problems and if you don’t have these things it is because you don’t have enough faith. Or the “Name-it-claim-it Preacher” who teaches that essentially all you have to do is name what you want and by faith claim it and you will have what you name and never have any problems. Or the formulaic preachers who routinely preach the Bible as if it lays out a magic formula for success and all you have to do is follow the formula and you will never have any problems.*
2. **What do you think Dr. Swindoll means by the entire quote/statement above?** *I think that Dr. Swindoll is saying that the modern idea that Christians never have problems and that becoming a Christian will bring an end to all troubles in this life is unbiblical... unscriptural and false.*
3. **Do you agree or disagree with the quote/statement? Why?** *I agree with this the statement that Dr. Swindoll makes. I believe that it is scriptural that it rains on the “just” and the*

“unjust” ... that everyone has problems and that Christians are not immune to problems in this life.

In our comfort-at-any-cost society, things like affliction, pain, persecution, hardship, and other forms of suffering are viewed as enemies. Many of us who are believers/Christians are frequently surprised, even angered, when we have to endure such difficulties. Unlike the message conveyed by Isaac Watts in his hymn “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?” numerous believers hope to be “carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease.” But that is an unrealistic and unbiblical expectation. Repeatedly throughout God’s Word (the Bible) we are told that there is no escape from life’s brutal blows. We are also told that we should not view all of them as unfair attacks against us. Indeed. Our all-good Lord has included suffering in His plan for each one of us. On the road to glory there must be some barriers to confront and some mountains to scale. Whether we like it or not, the path to the crown is by way of the cross we must bear (Mark 8:34). This section of 1 Thessalonians we are going to zero in on here will help us better understand our sufferings and teach us how God wants us to respond to them not only for our good and His glory, but also that our lives might become “catching” to others who want to know if the Christian faith really works.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT...

Whenever we pass through at time of real struggle and pain, we usually find ourselves experiencing tension between acceptance and resistance. On one side of the coin, we place our hands in God’s sovereign and loving care, realizing that He never makes a mistake. We know that there is a good purpose for everything He allows to pierce our lives.

Romans 8:28 remind us, *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”*

On the flip side, however, we tend to fight against the intrusion of suffering, vowing never to give up the hope that we can endure, even overcome, the parasite that is draining our life from us. Usually we find ourselves responding on both sides; we plead for God to exercise mercy and healing, while trying to rest in His loving control. And through it all, we often ask,

- Does any of this have to happen at all?
- Can’t suffering and the resultant tensions be avoided altogether?

Scripture plainly answers no. The biblical response to questions like these on suffering gives us at least 2 surprising points to get our heads around:

2 things the Bible tells us about suffering:

- (1) **Suffering is inevitable** – Since sin first entered the world through disobedience of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), suffering has been an inescapable part of life. This does not imply that all suffering is a result of a person’s own sin. It does imply that such suffering flows from the fact that sin has entered the human race. Indeed, suffering is one thing that we all have in common. Not even Christians are exempt from experiencing the pangs of suffering. Let’s look at three passages that make this clear.

3 Passages on Suffering:

1. **Philippians 1:29** – *“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His said.”* 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...

- **Matthew 26:36-27:50**
- **Acts 5:12-42**
- **Acts 7:54-8:3**

As Christians, we have been called to suffer in Christ’s behalf.

2. **2 Corinthians 4:8-10** – *“⁸ We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.”* Here we learn that part of the Christian life “will” include affliction, perplexity, persecution, and near-knockout blows. Why? So that the “life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.” What do you think that means? I think it alludes to the fact that how we handle our suffering can be a witness of the sustaining and sufficiency of Christ in our lives... that our Christian faith works and makes a difference.

3. **1 Peter 4:12-16** – *“¹² Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ¹³ but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. ¹⁴ If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.”* I quote this passage quite often. It seems to put our suffering into perspective for me anyway. 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” and have “exceeding joy” Peter says, realizing that we are “...blessed... for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” Our difficult, painful times can be evidence that we are going 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.

- (2) **Pain is essential** – Even though we want our comfort zone free from pain, God will often invade and squeeze it for our own good. In fact, suffering is essential to our maturing process in Christ. Let’s look at two passages that verify this...

2 Passages that Confirm that Suffering is Essential:

1. **Psalm 119:67,71,75** – Verse 16, *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.”* Verse 71, *“It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.”* Verse 75, *“I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are right, and that 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 23:2), but many times there is no better way for Him to gain our attention.

2. **Ecclesiastes 7:13-14** – *¹³ Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked? ¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing that will come after him.* 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 words translated 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.

TAKING THE THESSALONIANS AS AN EXAMPLE...

Building on the foundation we have laid above, let's consider the Thessalonians' example of suffering portrayed in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-8.

Paul's Relational Concern (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, 5)

¹ Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, ² and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith... ⁵ For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain. When Paul ministered among the Thessalonians, he did so "amid much opposition (2:2). And when he was torn away from their presence (2:17), a storm of suffering fell upon the Thessalonians who he had established in the faith (2:14). As a consequence, Paul was genuinely concerned about how these new Christians were doing through it all. So he sent Timothy to "strengthen and encourage" them in their faith (3:2). The Greek term in verse 5 as *"establish"* (or strengthen in some translations) literally means *"to shore up, to buttress."* Timothy was sent to enable the Thessalonians to stand strong against the onslaught of persecution. The Greek word of "encourage" is often translated as comfort. It conveys the idea of standing alongside another person in order to put courage into them. Paul sent Timothy to strengthen and reassure the Thessalonians in their faith. His goal was not to exhort them to gut it out by the sheer exertion of willpower. Instead, his objective was to edify them in the fact that God would see them through this... indeed, that since He was accomplishing a mighty work in them, they were experiencing the attacks of the enemy. So Paul was calling on them to stand firm in God's all-sufficient power. For good reason, 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 have been in vain (3:5). Like Paul, it would be wise for us to follow up our concerns for the spiritual condition of other believers. All of us are in a spiritual warfare, and we cannot be effective in our fight without uniting and helping each other (Ephesians 6:10-20)

The Theological Perspective (1 Thessalonians 3:3-4)

³ that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. ⁴ For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. Paul sent Timothy on his mission so that none of the Thessalonians believers would be "shaken by these afflictions." ***How do you think that Timothy might have helped this? Why might Timothy had to offer and in what way?***

What we can do to help others shaken by affliction?

- (1) **Be present** - Romans 15:1, *"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves."* The idea of "bearing with" is the idea of being with that one who is weak and hurting... in other word being present. Sometimes it is just being present with someone who is hurting and struggling. You don't have to have all the right words to say. Sometimes our words fall short, and sometimes we don't know what to say. You don't have to. Just be present. Be Jesus' hands and feet to that person.
- (2) **Be a good listener** - Galatians 6:2, *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."* An idea that may be present in Paul's idea of "bearing one another's burdens" is letting one who is hurting just unload their burden, their hurts, and afflictions on you by sharing what is going on in their life. Sometimes people just need to talk about it and get it off their chest, and we just need to be good listeners. Again, we don't have to have advice or words to say. We just need to listen and encourage, pray, and cry with!
- (3) **Be invested** – Sometimes when others are hurting or afflicted we can make it all about us... "Well, when I was going through this I did this!" or "Well, I want through the same thing!" "I know what you are going through!" "Well, let me tell you what happened to me!" We make it all about us and our problems. Philippians 2:4, *"Let each of you look out not only for your own interests, but also for the interest of others."* We need to be invested in the hurts and needs of that person and not make it all about us and our past hurts. They need us to be present and hear them and be fully invested in that person and what they are going through.
- (4) **Be helpful** – What do you need to do to help someone shaken by affliction? The short answer is, "Whatever need to be done!" Whatever that person needs. Paul's suggestion is a good one in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, *"Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all."* If that one need comfort, give comfort. If they need to be upheld in some way, find ways to hold them up... through prayer, or through taking care of some of their daily needs (rest, meals, phone calls, conversations, etc). If they just need time... your patience and time in helping may be the greatest gift of all.
- (5) **Be strengthening (encouraging)** - Hebrews 12:12, *"Strengthen the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees"*

Paul believed that "affliction need not unsettle people. Why could he maintain this believers? Because he knew, as did the Thessalonian believers, that Christians are "appointed" for suffering and that they have been forewarned that suffering would come (vv.3-4). God's training program for His children includes hardship and struggle. He knows that difficulties can smooth our rough edges as we travel the road toward holy perfection in Christ (James 1:2-4). So 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.

The Thessalonians' Personal Response (1 Thessalonians 6-8)

"⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—⁷ therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord." When Christians lose their

theological moorings and falter in the face of adversity, three damaging response generally occur...

3 damaging response to adversity:

- (1) **Resentment** – They may harbor resentment toward a former authority figure or someone they blame for their difficulty or affliction. Sometimes it may even be subtly aim at a resentment toward God or toward those not experiencing what you are experiencing.
- (2) **Isolation** – They may isolate themselves, cut themselves off from Christian friends. Often those who are hurting can retreat within themselves and shut themselves off from those who could and should be a help.
- (3) **Rejecting truth** – They can being to doubt and grow indifferent toward the biblical instruction they used to embrace

The Thessalonian Christians managed to withstand falling prey to all three responses. Paul tell us how they did it...

How to avoid falling pray to damaging response to adversity in our life?:

- (1) **Refuse to blame others for your suffering** – Look at this... the Thessalonian believers did not falter in their faith. Verse 6 says, *“⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you.”* They did not falter in their “faith and love,” and they continued to have “good remembrance” of Paul and his companions. They didn’t blame them or reject them.
- (2) **Maintain ties to your support group** – They actually longed to see Paul and Timothy as much as Paul and Timothy wanted to get together with the Thessalonians. The end of verse 6 says, *“⁶ ... greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you.”*
- (3) **Stay committed to spiritual truth** – Paul said in verses 7-8, *“⁷ therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.”* The Thessalonians did not doubt or grow indifferent to the truth they had received from Paul. Instead, they maintained their convictions 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.

NOW THAT WE UNDERSTAND...

No one enjoys going through tough times, but now that we understand some of what God’s Word says about them, let’s commit ourselves to embracing and recalling these biblical truths...

2 Important Biblical Truths Concerning Tough Times:

- (1) **Having our comfort zone invaded is essential, not unfair** – God is not treating us “unfairly” when we go through difficulties, hardships and tough times. We know a couple of things pragmatically:
 1. **It rains on the just and the unjust** – the saved and unsaved, Christians and non-Christians alike go through tough times. Just because we are Christians doesn’t mean we won’t have hardships. Most of us know this!

2. **God can actually grow us in the midst of difficulties** – “Count it all joy...” is just one reminder of this truth.
 3. **How we handle hardship can be a tremendous testimony** – God can use the tough times in our life, when we navigate them well, to actually draw others to Himself. When our faith sustains us through our difficulties and we handle them in the right way as believers, others may see that as a sign of hope for their own lives and come to know Jesus Christ through our witness in tough times.
- (2) **Suffering hardship as soldiers in battle is expected, not unusual** – We need to continually keep before us the fact that there’s a war going on, and we’re right in the middle of it. Therefore, we must hold fast to the truth and consider our sufferings to be relatively unimportant in comparison to our promoting of divine truth.