

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

(The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church)

### **Standing with Our Suffering Family**

(1 Thessalonians 2:14-20)

#### **Introduction: The curse of high expectations...**

The San Antonio Spurs - and especially, Spurs fans - will be satisfied with nothing but a title at the end of this season's campaign.

Having won five NBA championships since 1999, we Spurs fans are spoiled rotten, and we like it that way. Past success has set the bar of expectation high.

Now, contrast that hopeful expectations many of us have for the Spurs, with our family's first home-buying experience. It was 1983 and Kathy and I were looking to buy a home for our growing family.

We found one we could buy and were able to lock in a 30-year mortgage at...12%. Today that looks like a terrible rate.

But, two years before we bought our home, interest rates had been at 20.5%, and a year before we bought (1982), the average home mortgage interest rate was hovering around 16%. Our expectations for a good low interest rate were very low.

This season, some NBA fans will consider it a win if their team even makes the playoffs. Not Spurs fans. And home buyers today will be upset if they have to pay anything above 6% interest on a mortgage.

A history of success and good times breeds high expectations. A history of challenges and hard times leads to lower expectations.

#### *Biblical expectations...*

This morning, we're going to set the bar of expectations for Christian experience at a biblical and historical norm.

Now, we who have placed our trust in Jesus for salvation delight in the promises of God. And God has given us many wonderful promises. We can expect that these will be our portion.

- God promises, [*Hebrews 13:5*] ***'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you'***
- Jesus promises [*John 14:27*] ***"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you"***
- Nehemiah promised the people of God in his day, [*Nehemiah 8:10*]... ***"the joy of the Lord is your strength."***

Those are all great promises. And then there are these. Jesus said:

***[John 16:33] "In the world you will have tribulation."***

***[John 15:20] "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."***

***[Luke 21:12] "They will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake."<sup>1</sup>***

The Apostle Paul promised brand-new Christians on the First Missionary Journey, [*Acts 14:22*]... ***"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."*** And much later, he wrote to Timothy, [*2 Timothy 3:12*] ***Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."<sup>2</sup>***

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<sup>1</sup> See also, [*Matthew 5:10*] ***"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [11] "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. [12] "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*** (Also, Matthew 5:44; Mark 10:29-30; Luke 21:12; John 15:20)

<sup>2</sup> See also [*Romans 12:14*] ***Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... [2 Timothy 1:8] Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God*** (1 Corinthians 4:12; 2 Corinthians 12:10)

We have the difficult promises so that we won't be surprised when the hard times come. The delightful ones carry us through the times of challenge.

*The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church...*

Today, a day observed by lots of churches and Christian groups as "The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church", you and I are going to focus on the reality of persecution.

Many of our fellow Christians are experiencing the things that the Apostle Paul and Jesus told us to expect. They are facing persecution.

During our time together this morning:

- we'll see first-century Christians and Christians today suffering simply because they faithfully follow Jesus;
- we'll recalibrate our own expectations for life in Jesus, as we faithfully follow Him; and
- we'll consider responses that we, who are not facing persecution, might make to help our suffering family around the world.

Our biblical case study for the theme of persecution will be the church established by Paul on the Second Missionary Journey in the city of Thessalonica. This was a very healthy church.

*Meet the church at Thessalonica*

The first century church in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica was a church of unforgettable impact. One verse helps us see just how healthy it was.

***[1 Thessalonians 1:6] You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.***

So, this church had a tremendous impact, both in the city of Thessalonica and on the whole surrounding region. Which is not to say that life was easy for the Thessalonian Christians...

The Apostle Paul knew just how tough it was. So, right off the bat, he reminded them that things had been tough on followers of Jesus from the very beginning.

**Faithful in Suffering (vv. 14)**

***[14] For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews<sup>3</sup>***

**Suffering in Judea**

Since we've been working our way through the book of Acts for the last few months, we know that suffering was a "given" for Christ-followers from early on. Very soon after the church was birthed on the Day of Pentecost, strong opposition surfaced in Jerusalem.

- The apostles Peter and John were arrested for spreading the news about Jesus and were ordered to stop talking about Him (Acts 4).
- When the apostles kept on spreading the Gospel, the whole group of them was arrested and beaten (Acts 5).
- Soon after this, a church leader, Stephen, was stoned to death for his bold testimony about Jesus (Acts 7).
- Then, widespread persecution broke out with house-to-house raids that forced many believers to flee Jerusalem.

Paul brought up the early church's suffering when writing to the Thessalonians to remind them that their experience of suffering was not abnormal. It's been the norm.

**Suffering in Thessalonica**

When Paul and his team blew into Thessalonica on the Second Missionary Journey, they presented the Gospel on three consecutive Sabbaths in the city's Jewish synagogue.

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<sup>3</sup> Yes, Judean churches endured persecution at the hands of the Jews. But nothing we are talking about today should lead in any way to anti-Semitism! The New Testament affirms that some Jews delivered Jesus over to be crucified. But Jesus was killed by some non-Jews and He died for the sins of ALL.

A few from the Jewish community believed, and so did **[Acts 17:4] a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women** of the city.

Then, a lot of those who didn't believe opposed the Jesus movement, formed a mob, and started a riot to stop the spread of Paul's message.

Given the fierceness of the opposition, Paul and his friends left Thessalonica to go to the neighboring city of Berea. Things went well in Berea...until those who had opposed them in Thessalonica came to stir up trouble there, too.

Soon, these Thessalonian opponents forced Paul to leave Berea, too, which left the opposition free to go back home to Thessalonica.

We can only imagine that when they got home, they continued to make life miserable for the Christians in Thessalonica.<sup>4</sup> So, put yourself in the shoes of the relatively young Thessalonian Christians.

You have suffered one attack after another, one accusation after another, one wave of persecution after another.

Are you wondering - *"Are we doing something wrong? Has God forgotten us? Has He withdrawn His blessing?"*

To which Paul responded, *"No! You're doing everything right. God has not forgotten you and you are still His treasured people. Jesus' followers have suffered persecution from day one. Being opposed for following Christ is actually a sign that you're doing well."*

And he would say the same things to Christians who are suffering today.

### **Suffering in 2017**

It is certainly possible that any of us could be on the receiving end of some form of persecution.

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<sup>4</sup> Surely the Thessalonian Christians would have been excommunicated from the synagogue. Other sufferings are likely.

I've known people who have taken a stand for Christ and have been shunned from their families. They have been shut out in professional circles.

As our nation's culture continues to shift away from a friendliness to Christianity,<sup>5</sup> identifying as a devoted follower of Jesus may increasingly lead to missed promotions at work, ridicule at school, a lawsuit, or even criminal charges.

It does happen here. But, to this point, opposition is not yet widespread.

In many parts of the world, though, overt persecution against Christians is a widespread and life-threatening reality. Wide swaths of our planet are danger zones for Christians.<sup>6</sup>

You and I are especially honored that, among those our church supports who have gone out for the sake of the Name of Jesus, several serve Him in what are referred to as "creative access" countries.

For instance, we are partners with a family that serves in India. India is a wonderful place populated by some 1.3 billion people. But there are places in India that are not safe for Christians.

Das Addanki and Sobha Puppala recently moved to North Carolina after having been a part of Northwest for many years. Das told me recently that when they lived in India, they were in *southern* India (Hyderabad), where Christians are normally welcomed and safe.

However, Das went on to tell me that the family our church supports is in the north, in the city of Varanasi, the spiritual heart of Hinduism. There, Christianity is not viewed favorably. Christians are often not at all safe.

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<sup>5</sup> See the message series on "Thriving in Babylon" (messages from the book of Daniel) on the church website: [www.nwchurch.org](http://www.nwchurch.org).

<sup>6</sup> Vitaliy Petrov was one of the men (along with his brother, Igor) who gave leadership to the Bible school in Kursk - The Trinity Equipping Center - I served in the early 2000's. Vitaliy is a 4<sup>th</sup> generation believer whose great-grandparents and grandparents died for their faith in Soviet gulags in Siberia and Kazakhstan. His father was a pastor in Kursk who opened dozens of house churches and was constantly harassed by the KGB. Vitaliy once told me, *"In Russia, short periods of religious freedom are followed by long periods of persecution."*

We are partners with others who serve in dicey places in Africa and Central America and in an increasingly volatile Europe.

In addition, the ministries of a couple of the people we support involve extensive travel to some of the most dangerous places on earth for Christians. They often must share Christ secretly and are exposed to danger. The travel is inconvenient. They take risks for the Gospel.

The dangers our missionaries face are significant, but they are not as great as the dangers faced by the national Christians in closed countries. Outspoken Christian citizens may be imprisoned, suffer loss of property, endure beatings and even lose their lives - just because they are living for Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

In many places, things have not changed much in the last two thousand years. In many places, the Thessalonian situation repeats daily.

It's important to know all of this. Knowing that persecution of Christians is "normal" - not that it's good - both historically and biblically, and that it is currently occurring, moves the bar of our own life expectations to a more realistic level.

We need not be surprised if hardship or inconvenience or even opposition comes our way. It's part of our birthright as Jesus followers.

We continue to consider opposition to our faith as Paul, a former persecutor, writes about the damage the persecutors do.

### **The Persecutors (vv. 15-16)**

#### **Their Actions (vv. 15-16a)**

***[15] who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men,***

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<sup>7</sup> I once ate with a man from a Central Asian country who told of knowing people in his hometown who were persecuted. He himself had been beaten by Muslims when he became a Christian, but didn't consider this persecution. However, he did know people whose suffering rose to a level that he would call persecution.

***[16a] hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved;***<sup>8</sup>

*Back then, persecutors hindered the spread of the Gospel*

Obviously, opposition hurts the Christians they oppose. But, it also hurts those who will never hear the Gospel because the Christians who could have told them have been silenced.

There were lots of people in ancient Macedonia who never heard about Jesus because the heat of persecution kept the believers from spreading the message.

*Today, persecutors do the same*

The same kinds of damages are happening today where there is persecution. Christians are forced underground and lost people are less likely to hear the good news.

In dozens of countries around the world, those who believe in the same Jesus you and I do suffer for their faith. They have lost homes and seen their churches destroyed, have been injured, have been sold into slavery, and have lost family members to martyrdom.

Persecutors have done to them what the opposition did to the Thessalonians in AD 50.

Such suffering is well-documented by many groups. The one that I most rely on is **The Voice of the Martyrs**.

Kathy and I subscribe to **The Voice of the Martyrs** monthly magazine and count it a privilege to contribute to this ministry.

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<sup>8</sup> Over the centuries of Old Testament history, the Jews had persecuted the prophets God sent their way. Among them were Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, most of the minor prophet, and John the Baptist! So wholesale was their rejection of God's messengers that in the sermon Stephen preached before he was stoned to death he asked his opponents, *[Acts 7:52] "Which of the prophets did your fathers NOT persecute?"*

I urge you to become familiar with the Voice of the Martyrs. It is a rich source of news about world events that concerns the persecution of Christians.

Their website is [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com). Once there, you can register, browse the site, and learn about the progress of the Gospel in hard to reach places.

You can learn about needs and then pray for people in countries where there is very little religious freedom.

You can buy books that will educate you and inspire you with the stories of those who have stood firm for the Lord while undergoing unspeakable hardships by those who oppose the faith.

You'll discover extreme faithfulness in the stories you'll read from the lives of your suffering family members.

Persecution is nothing any of us would wish on our brothers and sisters. But those who are persecuted tell us that suffering for the sake of Jesus crystallizes what is most important in life.

God works powerfully in the heart of the believer who entrusts his or her soul to God while suffering for the faith.

And just as the first century church was not exterminated by the persecution they suffered, but rather came to know the Lord more deeply, the same thing is happening in many places today.

I would never glorify or romanticize suffering, but it is true that persecution has often served to purify and to galvanize the church. Persecution often works like a boot coming down on a fire that spreads the embers and sparks a fire of revival.<sup>9</sup>

So, ironically, the church is strengthened through persecution. Tragically, those who persecute are putting themselves in a horrible position.

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<sup>9</sup> The church father, Tertullian, famously said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

## Their Fate (v. 16b)

***[16b]... with the result that they*** (the persecutors) ***always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them<sup>10</sup> to the utmost.***<sup>11</sup>

### *The persecutor's plight*

Paul knew this firsthand. Before becoming a Christian, he was a violent persecutor of Christians. He arrested, beat, and even killed Christians.

God mercifully revealed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus and he learned that by opposing Jesus' followers, he was actually opposing God's Messiah.

Paul found that persecution hurts and hardens, desensitizes and degrades the persecutor even more than it damages the persecuted. Ultimately, God will vindicate the persecuted.<sup>12</sup> But those who oppose face an eternity separated from God.

And so, having tasted not the wrath, but the mercy of God, it is not surprising that the persecuted often respond with mercy and grace toward those who are persecuting them.

### *The response of the persecuted to the persecutor's plight*

Christian history is filled with stories of believers who have responded to their tormentors the same way Jesus did when He was crucified, ***[Luke 23:34]... "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."***

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<sup>10</sup> Aorist tense in "***has come***" indicating, not the imminence, but the certainty of God's wrath falling on them.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips version: Alas, I fear they are completing the full tale of their sins, and the wrath of God is over their heads.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Paul is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), just a few years away. Paul views it as so certain that it is as good as having happened. Or he may have in mind God's wrath which will fall on all who fail to believe in Jesus. Or he may be referring to the time of the Tribulation which will surely come because of their rejection of Jesus.

Richard Wurmbrand, who founded the **Voice of the Martyrs**, was a faithful Romanian pastor who suffered terribly in Soviet Union prisons for Jesus.

Wurmbrand wrote several books, one of which, Tortured for Christ, recounts some of his experiences and those of others who were sentenced to imprisonment and torture.

He tells us that he and his fellow prisoners prayed fervently for their prison guards while being beaten.<sup>13</sup>

The worst a persecutor can do to a Christian is kill him, which sentences a believer to an immediate entrance into Heaven. The persecutor faces something far worse.

Christians with God's perspective see the wrath that is falling on those who cause their suffering and pray for their persecutor's salvation.

That was Paul's own practice. When writing to the Christians in Rome, he added these thoughts about his fellow Jews, who had caused him so much trouble: **[9:2]...I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart** and **[10:1]...my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation."**

Many in the persecuted church today pray fervently for their persecutors who have not yet tasted God's grace. I have read about Christians in the Middle East who pray regularly for ISIS. I've met Christians in Kenya who pray for Al Shabab and Christians in Russia who pray for those who oppose the faith.

The persecutors are facing God's wrath and the persecuted want them to find the same mercy they themselves have found.

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<sup>13</sup> "I have seen Christians in Communist prisons with fifty pounds of chains on their feet, tortured with red-hot iron pokers, in whose throats spoonfuls of salt had been forced, being kept afterwards without water, starving, whipped, suffering from cold - and praying with fervor for the Communists." (p. 55)

We now come to the final words of this short passage in the letter Paul wrote to the suffering Thessalonian Christians. In them, we hear his great love for them.

Paul knew all about suffering from personal experience. In other places, he catalogues hardships he has endured for Jesus' sake.<sup>14</sup>

But here, he lets these suffering Christians know that he wanted to be with them and he wanted to help them. He loved them and he commended them for their faithfulness.

### **United with the Persecuted Church (vv. 17-20)**

#### **Ripped Apart, Still United (v. 17)**

**[17] But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.**

Earlier, Paul described himself as the Thessalonian Christian's **"mother"** (1:7) and **"brother"** (v. 9) and **"father"** (v. 11).

Now, he uses another family image to communicate how painful it was to have been forced to leave them so soon after they came to faith.

The word that Paul uses here to describe the separation (**[17] taken away**) is one that was used to describe a baby who was ripped away from its parents.

It may be that some in Thessalonica were saying that Paul did not want to return to them, that he didn't care enough to come back.

But it was not at all *"out of sight, out of mind."* He was desperate for them. He wasn't able to be with them because the opposition had forced him out.

Paul and the Thessalonians are still joined at the heart, even if physically separated. He wants nothing more than to see them soon.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See especially 2 Corinthians 11.

We can hardly imagine how encouraging it would have been for the Thessalonians (those persecuted young Christians) to have read of Paul's love and concern for them.

But to this point he had not been able to make it back. And he knows why.

### The Enemy Behind the Opposition

***[18] For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul,<sup>16</sup> more than once—and yet Satan hindered us.***

#### *Satanic opposition then*

He had made plans to visit Thessalonica. They were good plans.

But the plans didn't work out and Paul says that *somebody* put a roadblock in the way, making his road to Thessalonica impassable.<sup>17</sup>

Paul's purpose in wanting to return to Thessalonica was to provide spiritual nurture to some young, persecuted believers in Jesus. It makes perfect sense that Satan (v. 18) would want to stop such a thing from happening.

We don't know what roadblock Paul encountered that kept him from visiting his friends in Thessalonica. We do know that the roadblock was put in place by the enemy of the church.

Satan is a player in the affairs of this world. He made an impact on the ministry plans of the Apostle Paul in the first century.

It would naïve to think that Satan doesn't make an impact on ministry plans in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, he said that he "lusted" to see their face! That is the way the word we translate "eager with great desire" is usually rendered.

<sup>16</sup> It is rare for Paul to insert his own name in the middle of a letter. Shows intense emotion.

<sup>17</sup> In the ancient world, when a military force wanted to keep an advancing army from making progress, they would set up a road block by felling trees and laying them across the road.

#### *Satanic opposition now*

Satanic opposition to the plans and purposes of God are no less real today than they were in the first century.

And it is not overreaction to conclude that the enemy has a hand in obstacles you face in doing what is in your heart to do for God. After all, "satan" means "adversary." He is YOUR adversary.

For reasons God does not always reveal, He sometimes permits Satan to do things that that make life harder for us, and that even keep us from serving Him in ways that we would long for.<sup>18</sup>

So...

- when our missionary friends are having trouble getting visas that will allow them to stay in a country that is hostile to Christianity (as has happened recently); or
- when they are having trouble getting permission from officials to start a business so that they can stay in country (as has happened recently); or
- when they experience health problems at a critical time of the year when there is an open door for ministry (as has frequently happened)...

...we would do well to think as Paul thought, and pray against the ***"spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places"*** (Ephesians 6).

When you want to serve Jesus and then run into roadblocks, hindrances, challenges, opposition, don't assume coincidence or bad luck. It might be your enemy's work.

And in case that is the case, your best course will be to pray that the Lord will overwhelm your adversary.

Paul concludes his thoughts about persecution to the suffering Thessalonians in what follows.

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<sup>18</sup> Note the book of Job, where Job suffered terribly because God gave Satan permission to afflict Job - and Job only found out about it at the very end of the time of affliction. While it was going on, Job didn't have a clue.

## A Treasured Friendship

***[19] For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? [20] For you are our glory and joy.***

Paul had good friends in Thessalonica. They were living in the lion's den and were standing firm for Jesus. These final words tell us of the great honor and joy it is to link arms with our suffering family.

The two verses, taken together simply mean, *"I'm proud of you and I'm honored to be your partner."*

And as it was in the first century, so it is today. We are proud of our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering for Jesus and we are honored to be their partners in serving Jesus.

## **Conclusion:**

There are at least two take-aways from this morning's passage.

The first is that we are called to express our solidarity with brothers and sisters who are suffering. We are called to pray for and to support them.

Listen to what the author of the book of Hebrews tells us.

***[Hebrews 13:3] Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.***

We "remember" them by praying for them AND by our seeking ways to support them in their hour of need.

Will you pray for them? Will you look for ways to support your family at their time of need?

The second takeaway has to do with expectations for what our life with Jesus will look like.

We must adjust our life expectations to a biblical norm. A life of ever-improving standards of living, relationships that all "work", and the enjoyment of all creature comforts isn't realistic.

A realistic expectation for living as a Jesus-follower will include a certain level of risk and danger, loss, suffering, and inconvenience - even persecution - while enjoying God's presence now and anticipating a glorious future.