

## **2 Thessalonians (1): Comfort for the Persecuted (1)**

Today we begin to examine Paul's second epistle to the church at Thessalonica. As with 1 Thessalonians, which we completed three weeks ago, I have never taught through this epistle verse by verse. I do not know how long we will be in this book. We addressed 1 Thessalonians in 23 Sundays. 1 Thessalonians has 5 chapters. This epistle has 3 chapters, so I do not anticipate many Sundays in this study.

Introductory matters are commonly addressed at the beginning of the study of a book of the Bible. When we began to study 1 Thessalonians, we pointed out that in the arena of formal biblical scholarship, the "introduction" of a book has a technical meaning. An introduction addresses matters of authorship, the date when a book is written, the place where the book was written, the identification of the original readers including the place to which the book was sent, the canonicity of the book, the occasion for the writing of it, and usually the major themes of the book are identified. This information is important to understand, for it affects how the book is then read and interpreted. But regarding the introduction to 2 Thessalonians, we may simply repeat much of what we said in the introduction to 1 Thessalonians.

The Apostle Paul is the attributed author of this epistle. But in addition, we read in verse 1 that this epistle was also from Silvanus and Timothy also, but we should understand the apostle to be the principle writer of this epistle. Paul mentioned these two men for they had been with him when he initially evangelized the community and began the church. The church knew these men and they knew the church quite well.

We described the destination of this epistle in our first study. Thessalonica (or *Thessaloniki*) was the capital city of the province of Macedonia, a region just north of the Balkan Peninsula of Greece. The city was built on an important Roman trade route that bridged the west with the east, which was known as the *Via Egnatia*. Rome had granted this province to govern itself, so it had its own system of government with its leaders called politarchs.

The church at Thessalonica contained Jewish converts to Christ, along with Gentile Christians. Paul had begun the church on his second missionary journey. Perhaps it would be good for us to review this event again. **Acts 17:1-9** read,

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup>explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." <sup>4</sup>And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

<sup>5</sup>But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. <sup>6</sup>But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. <sup>7</sup>Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus." <sup>8</sup>And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. <sup>9</sup>So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. (Acts 17:1-9)

We read that the ones who received Paul's gospel were some of the Jews and "a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women." These Greeks had probably been "God-

fearers”, Gentiles who had turned away from the pagan morality of the Romans and embraced the God and ethical standards promoted by the Jews. The result of many of these Jews and Greeks coming to Christ through the gospel was that they left the synagogue and joined themselves with Paul, Silas, and Timothy in the newly formed church.

Paul had written his first epistle probably at Corinth in the year AD 50 or 51. Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians not long afterward, perhaps after only a few months. Of Paul’s letters, therefore, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are among the earliest of his letters contained in our New Testament.

Why did Paul write 2 Thessalonians? These Christians at Thessalonica had experienced persecution for the faith and they were in need of instruction and encouragement as they faced these afflictions. But in addition, Paul had addressed a number of issues in his first epistle, including instruction regarding the second coming of Jesus Christ and the need for Christians to be prepared for that event. But the contents of 2 Thessalonians suggests that the church either failed to understand Paul’s instruction rightly, or that some in the church had drawn false conclusions and established wrong behavior with view to the coming of Christ. It is clear that Paul wrote the second epistle to correct errant belief and practice in the church, which perhaps grew from their wrong application of what he had written to them in his first epistle.

It would seem that some in the church at Thessalonica had concluded from Paul’s letter that the second coming of Jesus Christ was immanent, that He would return very, very soon. Some perhaps thought that He was returning so soon, that the time for the affairs of this life was all but over. There were those who had even ceased or refused to work any longer. They had become a burden to others in the church, expecting to be supported by them. And then there were those that thought wrongly that Christ had already returned, and that they had missed out on His coming. Paul wrote this second epistle to correct their belief and behavior.

This epistle contains information about the second coming that is not found in other places of the Word of God. It speaks of trouble and tribulation. It addresses in some detail the life and end of the antichrist, the man of sin. Because of these themes, this epistle has been the source of much prophetic speculation and end time conjecture. In our study we will consider some common assertions about the end times that are unwarranted from the text. I believe that we will find 2 Thessalonians 2 particularly interesting and informative.

Let us read the first chapter of this epistle. This reading is from the New English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>1</sup>Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

<sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. <sup>4</sup>Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

<sup>5</sup>This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— <sup>6</sup>since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, <sup>7</sup>and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels <sup>8</sup>in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup>They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, <sup>10</sup>when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. <sup>11</sup>To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, <sup>12</sup>so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is an outline that may guide us in our study<sup>1</sup>:

- I. Salutation: grace and peace (1:1, 2)
- II. Courage for suffering saints (1:3-12)
  - A. Thanksgiving for faith, love, and endurance in tribulation (1:3, 4)
  - B. Judgment on persecutors and glory for saints (1:5-10)
  - C. Prayer for power and glory (1:11, 12)
- III. Correction of mistaken end-times expectations (2:1-12)
  - A. The false report of the Day of Christ (2:1, 2)
  - B. The rise and destruction of the man of sin (2:3-12)
- IV. Confidence in salvation and call to prayer (2:13-3:5)
  - A. Thanksgiving and exhortation to elect sinners (2:13-15)
  - B. Prayer for comfort and strength (2:16, 17)
  - C. Request for prayer for the mission (3:1-2)
  - D. Assurance and Prayer for endurance (3:3-5)
  - E. Command to discipline disorderly brothers (3:6-15)
- V. Farewell: peace and grace (3:16-18)

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Let us first consider Paul's

### **I. Salutation: grace and peace (1:1, 2)**

Paul opened his epistle in a customary manner:

<sup>1</sup>Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,  
To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:  
<sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is virtually the same salutation that Paul gave in his first epistle. It reads:

<sup>1</sup>Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,  
to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:  
Grace to you and peace.

You can see that in our ESV text the words at the end of 2 Thessalonians 1:2, "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ", do not appear in 2 Thessalonians 1:1, but it simply ends with the words, "grace to you and peace." There is no substantive difference in what Paul was expressing to this church. And because we addressed the content of this greetings when we considered 1 Thessalonians 1 and 2, we will not repeat our comments here. But our notes on those verses are available for your review.<sup>2</sup>

Let us next consider,

### **II. Courage for suffering saints (1:3-12)**

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly modified outline taken from *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, Joel Beeke, gen. ed. (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), pp. 1743f.

<sup>2</sup> See sermon **FBC870**, September 25, 2016.

## A. Thanksgiving for faith, love, and endurance in tribulation (1:3, 4)

Paul addressed the suffering that the Christians in the church at Thessalonica had been enduring. He told them that he thanked God, because in spite of their suffering, and perhaps even due to their suffering, they were living as faithful Christians among a hostile people in a fallen world. Their faith was growing and their faith was increasing even in their tribulation. He was pleased with them, even proud of them. He held them up before other churches as examples of faithful Christians.

Verses 3 and 4 read,

*<sup>3</sup>We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. <sup>4</sup>Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.*

It was a common convention in writing epistles of this nature to give a word of thanksgiving at this point, immediately following the greeting. Paul did so in his first letter. In 1 Thessalonians 1:2 and 3 we read, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, <sup>3</sup>remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” But here in 2 Thessalonians 1:3 he wrote, “We *ought always* to give thanks to God for you, brothers, *as is right*...” In 1 Thessalonians he wrote that he thanked God for them; in 2 Thessalonians he wrote that he *should* thank God for them. It is possible that Paul had heard from Timothy’s report of this church that these Christians had thought that they were not worthy of Paul’s commendation that he had conveyed in his first epistle. And so, Paul was telling them that it was right for him to have such high regard for them. As one wrote:

Paul has already written a very warm letter, containing some passages of high praise for the Thessalonian church. It is probable that in the subsequent communication that they had had with him (whether by letter, or by word of mouth) they had said that they were not worthy of such praise. Paul strongly maintains that his words had not been too strong. This is an obligation resting on him, he says. The implication is that it would be wrong not to give thanks to God in such a situation. There is a certain emphasis on “we are bound,” and this is reinforced by the adverb “always.”<sup>3</sup>

We may see from Paul’s words that we, too, ought to always give thanks to God when we witness in others their growth in faith and increase in love for the brethren. We should give thanks to God for the grace that He bestows upon others and us. We should give thanksgiving to God especially for growth in faith and for increase in love for the brethren.

**Thomas Manton** (1620-1677) devoted an entire chapter (sermon) to 2 Thessalonians 1:3. In the typical manner of puritan preaching, after initially explaining the text, he set forth the normative doctrine taught in the text. He did so in his comments on verse 3. Actually, in his precise manner Manton set forth four doctrines from verse 3. Each one contains specific detail. Each builds upon the previous one. Here they are:

Doctrine 1: That it is a debt we owe to God to give thanks for his benefits.

Doctrine 2: That in thanksgiving to God we should specially own his spiritual benefits.

Doctrine 3: That not only the spiritual benefits vouchsafed to ourselves, but to others also, must be acknowledged with thankfulness.

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<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), p. 194.

Doctrine 4: That in thanksgiving for spiritual benefits, whether to ourselves or others, the increase of grace must be acknowledged, as well as the beginnings of it.

After Manton stated the doctrine, he argued reasons for it. And so, for his first doctrine, “That it is a debt we owe to God to give thanks for his benefits”, he gave six reasons. They include the following:

(1) “Justice requires it, for the benefits were given upon this condition, that we should praise God for them: Psalm 1:15, ‘Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.’”

This is God’s pact and agreement with us, that we shall have the benefit, and he will have the glory. As the king of Sodom said to Abraham, “Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself again” (Gen. 14:21), so in effect God says to us, “You shall have the comfort, but let me have the honour. We ourselves consent to this covenant; we seldom make prayers in our distress but we promise thankfulness: Hosea 14:2, “Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices.” We engage (promise) to offer praise when our requests are heard. Now when God heareth and granteth our requests, there is an obligation upon us to glorify God for the mercies received.”<sup>4</sup>

(2) “God by His precept (law) commanding it and we in our distress promising it, He expecteth that there should be thankful returns of the mercy afforded us.”

This truth is commonly illustrated in Scripture. When people fail to render unto God thanksgiving for the Lord having given benefits to them, His disfavour is evident. We read of King Hezekiah who had pleaded with God to heal him of his terminal disease. After God had graciously extended his life for 15 years, we read how he responded to His God:

<sup>24</sup>In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death, and he prayed to the LORD; and He spoke to him and gave him a sign. <sup>25</sup>But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor shown him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem. (2 Chron. 32:24f)

Our Lord Jesus expected thanksgiving in return to the grace He granted to others. We read of Jesus healing ten lepers.

<sup>11</sup>Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. <sup>13</sup>And they lifted up their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” <sup>14</sup>So when He saw them, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed. <sup>15</sup>And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, <sup>16</sup>and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup>So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? <sup>18</sup>***Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?***” (Luke 17:11-18)

When the Lord grants us mercy, or bestows His grace on us, He expects our thanksgiving in return; He expects us to give glory to God.

Manton went on to say that thanksgiving is a debt we owe to God for his benefits, because...

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Manton, *The Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 17 (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), p. 96.

(3) “It keepeth up the intercourse between us and God, which would be interrupted and broken off if we should discontinue our addresses to Him as soon as we have what we would have, and when our wants are supplied God should hear no more from us.”

What Manton was saying is that if we fail to give thanks when we receive the Lord’s benefits, then our communication with the Lord would only be intermittent, not continuous as it should be. We would only pray to Him when we needed something from Him, but our praying would end upon receiving the answer to our prayers. But if we are rendering thanksgiving to God for the benefits that He bestows upon us, then our communication with God will tend to alternate between our petitions offered to Him in our need and our thanksgiving offered to Him in our joy of having received freely from His hand.

But further, we owe thanksgiving to God for His benefits, because...

(4) “It continueth a succession of mercies, for the more thankful we are for them the more they are increased upon us, as a husbandman trusts more of his precious seed in fruitful soils.”

When we are quick and many in our expressions of gratefulness to our God, He grants us more blessing for He knows it will return to Him in much praise.

And further still...

(5) In offering thanksgiving all spiritual graces are acted and promoted.

What Manton meant by this is that when we offer thanksgiving, God’s grace in us is made manifest, or displayed. We do exercise *faith* when we thank God for His benefits to us. We are expressing our confidence in His presence and His power working on our behalf and in answer to our prayer. We show forth our *love* to God through our thanksgiving. “I love the LORD, because He has heard My voice and my supplications” (Psa. 116:1). We show forth our *humility* in that in our thanksgiving to God is an acknowledgment of our need of Him, our helplessness apart from Him, and our knowledge that the blessing was not due to the work of our hands or the merit of our person.

And lastly,...

(6) “In offering thanksgiving it prevents us from committing other sins.”

An unthankful heart will soon become a hardened heart. When the unthankful person receives benefits from God, he may easily take them for granted. They become curses instead of blessing. Psalm 69:22 reads, “Let their table become a snare before them, and their well-being a trap.”

These are the six reasons are given for the first of four doctrines, or normative teachings, that Manton set forth from 2 Thessalonians 1:3. He gives reasons for each of the other three doctrines that he also identified, which we do not have time or space to rehearse. Let us return to our text.

Again, Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 1:3 and 4,

<sup>3</sup>We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. <sup>4</sup>Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

Paul had expressed in his first epistle his desire that they would increase in these very ways. We read in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you...” And in 1 Thessalonians 4:1 He wrote, “Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God.” And finally in 1 Thessalonians 4:9 and 10 we read, “But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more.” And now here in his second epistle, he could write, “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.” In just a few months of passing time, the apostle was seeing realized in these Christians that which he had formally desired and prayed for them just a few months before. It is no surprise Paul felt obligated to thank God for His work of grace in these Christians.

We read in verse 4 that what impressed Paul about the grace that God had given to them, was that He blessed them in the midst of the persecution that they were enduring. **Verse 4** reads,

Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith ***in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.***

Their faith in Christ was a tested faith. It continued strong even when tried. It was seen in their steadfastness. Their commitment to Jesus Christ was unwavering, even when they were persecuted for their faith.

Paul mentions “persecutions” and “afflictions.” Probably “persecutions” are one specific form of the “afflictions” they were enduring. “These distresses are here characterized as *persecutions* which is the more specific term, and *afflictions*, which is the more general term.”<sup>5</sup>

“Afflictions”, therefore, may be viewed as a category of various kinds of difficulties. Here, persecutions is one form of afflictions that Christians suffer. Other kinds of afflictions may include sickness, weakness, money problems, family problems, struggling with sin, work issues, day to day obstacles that upset our peace and disturb our souls. Take note, the absence of “afflictions” is no indication of God’s favor, that you are “doing everything right”, and so all is going smoothly. But rather the presence of afflictions may be expected. The enduring of afflictions is the norm for the Christian life. And when you exercise and exhibit “steadfastness and faith in the afflictions that you are enduring”, then you have the evidence of God’s great grace upon you. It is very easy, but it is very wrong, to think that we may determine God’s favor of us based upon what is happening to us. But this is terribly wrong.

When Paul used the term, afflictions, he was describing the common experience of Christians in this fallen world. The afflictions which these Christians were experiencing were not unusual, out-of-the-ordinary events, which only happen to some from time to time. Afflictions characterize the experience of most Christians most of the time in this present age. The Greek word, **θλίψεσίν** (*thlipsisin*), translated as “afflictions” here, is also translated as “tribulation(s).” Paul used this same word elsewhere in his writings:

**Ephesians 3:13.** “Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my ***tribulations*** for you, which is your glory.”

**2 Corinthians 6:3-8.** “We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. <sup>4</sup>But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in ***tribulations***, in needs, in distresses, <sup>5</sup>in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; <sup>6</sup>by purity, by

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<sup>5</sup> William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 2007), p. 156.

knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, <sup>7</sup>by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, <sup>8</sup>by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true.”

**Romans 5:3.** “And not only that, but we also glory in *tribulations*, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance.

**Romans 8:35.** “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall *tribulation*, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”

**2 Timothy 3:10f.** “But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, <sup>11</sup>persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra-- what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me.”

**1 Thessalonians 3:4.** “For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer *tribulation*, just as it happened, and you know.”

What is portrayed for us through these verses and many others that could be cited is that the Christian life characterized by “tribulation.” In fact what we will discover in our study of 2 Thessalonians and related passages of Holy Scripture is that *this entire church age is a period of tribulation*, even what may be referred to as “the end time tribulation.” The “endtime tribulation began with the coming of Christ and these “last days” of tribulation continue unto His second coming. But we will address this more at a later time.

Next, in verses 5 through 10, we read of God bringing...

## **B. Judgment on persecutors and glory for saints (1:5-10)**

In this section of his epistle, Paul explained some of the purposes that God has in bringing His people through their tribulations. Let us read these verses again.

<sup>5</sup>This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— <sup>6</sup>since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, <sup>7</sup>and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels <sup>8</sup>in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup>They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, <sup>10</sup>when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

In **verse 5** Paul wrote, “*This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering...*”

Here are the comments of **Leon Morris**. They are lengthy, but they are helpful.

It is at first sight somewhat difficult to follow the Apostle’s train of thought. To us the fact of suffering seems to deny, rather than to prove, that God is working out His righteous purpose. But there are two things that must be said here. The one is that the New Testament does not look on suffering quite the same way as do most modern people. To us it is in itself an evil, something to be avoided at all costs. Now while the New Testament does not gloss over this aspect of suffering it does not lose sight either of the fact that in the providence of God suffering is often the means of



working out God's eternal purpose. It develops in the sufferers qualities of character. It teaches valuable lessons. Suffering is not thought of as something which may possibly be avoided by Christians. For him it is inevitable. He is ordained to it (1 Thess. 3:3). He must live out his life and develop his Christian character in a world which is dominated by non-Christian ideas. His faith is not some fragile thing, to be kept in a kind of spiritual cotton wool, insulated from all shocks. It is robust. It is to be manifested in the fires of trouble, and in the furnace of affliction. And not only is it to be manifested there, but, in part at any rate, it is to be fashioned in such places. The very troubles and afflictions which the world heaps on the believer become, under God, the means of making him what he ought to be. Suffering, when we have come to regard it in this light, is not to be thought of as evidence that God has forsaken us, but as evidence that God is with us.<sup>6</sup>

Our Lord suffered much tribulation in this world, and our God has predestined that Christians will be like their Lord in His suffering. As Jesus Christ bore a cross, so He would have us bear a cross after Him. Our Lord Jesus said, "If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). This is the calling of all true disciples of Jesus Christ, that is, all true believers. What this means is that God has appointed His people to suffer as His Son suffered.

**1 Peter 4:12.** "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.

**Philippians 1:29.** "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake."

**2 Timothy 3:12.** "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

**1 Thessalonians 3:4.** "For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know."

**Acts 14:12.** "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."

Our American culture knows little about the theology of suffering. That ignorance may be corrected in coming years given the way our society is going. The point is this, we are children of God living in a world that is hostile toward God; it will, therefore, be hostile toward God's people. All down through history this has been so. In most parts of the world this is so today. **John 15:18ff** reads,

If the world hates you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said unto you, 'The servant is not greater than his lord.' If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me.

But thankfully suffering brings spiritual benefit to God's children. Suffering establishes proper priorities in our lives. Suffering sets our minds upon the Lord rather than sinful pleasures. Suffering severs the affections of our hearts from the things of this fallen world and instils a desire in us to enter the world to come. Suffering moves us to see our own weakness and need for God's strengthening. Suffering enables us to better see our sinfulness and its effects, and our need for the Lord Jesus. Ultimately, our suffering leads us to have faith in, and hope for, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ when we will be

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), p. 198.

delivered once and for all from the presence of all sin. Without suffering we would not realize these things in our lives, so God has predestined that we will be conformed to Christ in His sufferings.

God takes us through extreme difficulty in order that we would learn to trust Him. We read on in 2 Corinthians 1:8ff

“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup>Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. ***But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.*** <sup>10</sup>He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.” (2 Cor. 1:8-10)

God will allow us to encounter “evil” and difficulty in life in order for us to reassess our values and reprioritize our desires so that they conform to God’s purposes for us. We may read an Old Testament prophecy of God’s work of grace among His people. “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD” (Mal. 3:3).

God allows us to encounter evil in order that we might learn to be strong and steadfast in adversity. In this way we become stronger Christians prepared to face and overcome greater difficulties in the future.

<sup>2</sup>Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2f)

And so, it is the way of the Lord with His people that they encounter and experience trial and trouble in this life in this world. We can expect it! Paul wrote the Thessalonians: “For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. (1 Thess. 3:4). And Peter wrote to “those who resided as aliens”, “the elect of God”:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.”

No, suffering is not unusual for the Christian; rather, we are called to encounter it in all its forms.

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But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10f)

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