

# Kiss the Rod

*1 Thessalonians*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Thessalonians  
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It's very good to be back. I was only gone one week but it felt like six months. I love being here with you so much and being in this pulpit and so I'm very glad to be back. I bring with me greetings from Grace Bible Fellowship in Singapore and Pastor Roger Ng. They very much appreciated the fact that you gave me the freedom to go there and to spend time with them. Their church is much like ours, a young church with a lot of young families and a lot of young babies. A growing church and a church that is seeking to be faithful to the word of God and so they are very much with us in spirit and in philosophy even though we are separated on the other side of the world. It was a very encouraging time for me to be with Roger and as fellow pastors with common training, we share so much in common that we're able to exchange ideas and exchange encouragements with one another. He is a precious friend and a man who is worthy of our ongoing prayers for his faithfulness in the ministry back there.

What we're going to do this morning is we're going to hit a little bit of a spiritual reset button before we return to the book of Ephesians next week. I wanted to take this opportunity to bring sort of a special message that I'm very glad that you are here to listen to and to respond to here today. I have no doubt in my mind that what we're going to see from God's word today is going to be very impactful on your life. It's immediately relevant to each one of you in one manner or another and it's something that I haven't taught on here from this passage since I have become pastor of Truth Community Church and I am very glad to open God's word to you on this matter.

We all taste suffering in this life. We all know what it's like to go through difficult circumstances that seem to be chronic, that seem to have no relief and no immediate answer in sight and you and I are alike, we tend toward discouragement. We are often downcast. We are sometimes fearful of what the future holds for us and the issue that I want to call to your mind today is that when you're clouded and your mind is wrapped up in things like that, you easily miss the fact that there is spiritual opportunity in the midst of the storm. Matthew Henry, the great Puritan commentator, said this and I quote, "Of the many that are afflicted and oppressed, few get the good they might get by their affliction. It should drive them to God but how seldom is this the case." You see, God has prepared you for the sufferings and the difficulties that you are going through and not only that, he has prepared your sufferings and your hardships for you. A master sculptor

has shaped the difficulties that are in your life for the design that they would produce a particular spiritual result and attitudes in your heart and it's easier to respond to trials when we are mindful of these things.

The Apostle Paul wrote the letters to the Thessalonians in a spirit that helps us see this and I want you to turn to 1 Thessalonians here this morning, actually we'll go one other place before we go there first. But he wrote these letters to believers who were persecuted and who were suffering for their faith. There was hostility against them and there was hardship that was embedded in their very existence and Paul is writing to them to bring out the spiritual opportunities and to bring forth the spiritual fruit that should occur in the life of every believer who suffers in whatever manner it may be. So I want you today to call to mind the things that are causing you to struggle in this current season of life that you are going through; the things that make you weary; the things that make you sad; the things that make you anxious about what lies ahead; perhaps the things that you are depressed about over in the past. I want to put all of those things on the table and lay them out before us and systematically give you the tools that you need to bring those things into a perspective that will allow you to generate spiritual fruit from them. There is no question but that God has appointed your specific trial, your specific struggle, your specific weakness, in order to achieve specific spiritual results in your life and though our circumstances and our struggles are all different outwardly, the purposes of God in them are the same for us all and we are intended to respond to them rightly in a way that will bring spiritual fruit in our own hearts and equip us to be those instruments of glory to God and of ministry to others. The time for us of being self-centered and selfish in our trials is over and it's time for us to take a God-centered focus and to respond to them in the way that he intends us to do.

Well, as I said, Paul wrote the Thessalonian epistles to persecuted believers and as you keep your finger in 1 Thessalonians, turn over to the book of Acts 17 so that we can get a sense of the hostility that was directed against that church and the background that Paul was mindful of as he wrote to them to encourage them. Acts 17 gives the historical record of the birth of the church at Thessalonica and what was happening in their midst as God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, worked on their hearts. Acts 17, beginning in verse 1. I'm going to read several verses here that will help set the context for us to receive God's instruction to us today. Acts 17:1 says, "Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'" Even in that verse you see a reminder that we walk in the footsteps of one who suffered on our behalf. Of course we're going to suffer if we're following a suffering Savior.

Well, that's a side point. Go back to verse 4, "And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women." So there were people that responded to the Gospel and believed in Christ and they joined with them. What happened in response to that from those who

were around them? Verse 5, "But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them." So here they are as brand new believers and immediately they are met with false accusations about what they are doing and what the spiritual import of their gatherings and their believing in Christ were. They were falsely accused of being treasonous to Caesar and there was an uproar and all kinds of spiritual uproar and mob uproar around them in the midst of believing in Christ and they were suffering as a result at the hands of wicked men and their circumstances, attendant to believing in Christ, became very unpleasant very quickly.

Now Paul, mindful of this background, now writes to the Thessalonians in order to help them understand how they are to respond to their difficulty and to call them to higher spiritual ground. Beloved, what we have here today for you and me is a recognition that suffering and difficulty is common to the Christian life. It is meant to be that way and our job is not to seek immediate relief from it, our immediate first principle is not to get out from under the circumstances but to respond to them in a right way and that's what we need to see today. Paul's letter here to the Thessalonians is going to give us five principles to help you thrive in trials and we're going to look at this letter in an overview fashion this morning. This is the only message that I'm going to preach on this and so it's especially urgent for you to pay heed and to listen and to take these things to heart because we're only touching on this here this morning.

First of all, what can we say about the nature of trials and what God's purposes are for them? What is it that is available to you in the midst of the personal hardship that you are going through? What is the uncertainty of life supposed to provoke in you? It is not fear and anxiety. It is not shrinking away. It is not complaining and self-centeredness. No, the first principle here this morning: your trials can bring joy, not despair. Your trials can bring joy, not despair and if you have an immediate reaction against that and say, "You don't know what I'm going through," I don't need to know what you're going through. What matters here are the principles of God's word and the way that he leads and directs and what he expects from believers in the midst of their suffering and, frankly, we should all prefer joy over despair. Some people like to wallow in their self-pity, like to wallow in their complaints, but that is not a godly response to the circumstances of life. We belong to a great and a glorious and a gracious God who has shown favor to us and saved us by the blood of Christ and welcomed us into his family, into his kingdom, and he has secured eternal blessedness for us. If we are living under the hand of that kind of God, that kind of good and gracious heavenly Father, then our attitudes need to reflect that and there needs to be an element of joy in every one of us as we respond to the difficulties of life.

What is joy? It's a deep gladness that transcends circumstances and what we see here as we look at the book of Thessalonians, the Thessalonians received the word happily and gladly in the midst of serious difficulty. Look at verse 5 where Paul opens up on this topic and he says in verse 5, "our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." So he recalls to mind, he reminds them of the circumstances in which they received the Gospel and it was a time of power. It was a time of the manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit. It was a transforming event in their lives that changed them for all of eternity.

So he reminds them of this and then he speaks to what their response was in verse 6. He says, "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord," look at this, "having received the word in much tribulation with," what? "With the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." He says, "You did not collapse under the weight of the difficulties that you were facing. Ha, far to the contrary you, my fellow Christians, you became so joyful in the midst of opposition that you became an example to believers throughout the region. Your lives and your joy was a testimony to the converting, saving power of God," and he says, "I thank God for you." Look at what he said there in verse 2, chapter 1, verse 2, he says, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers." Why was he thankful? He was thankful because he was writing to a group of believers who manifested supernatural joy and thereby, by the power of their lives, placed a stamp of authenticity and reality upon the proclamation of the Gospel. Their joy in sorrow, their gladness in difficulty was the keynote that rang throughout that broad region in which they were living.

What were their trials? How does Paul summarize it later on? Look at chapter 2, verse 14. He says, "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, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost." He says, "Your own countrymen betrayed you, persecuted you and were acting with the same spirit that they did when they crucified the Lord Jesus Christ and when earlier in history they persecuted the prophets who preceded him." He says, "You're experiencing a suffering that is common to the people of God and you were imitators of us and you were imitators of Christ in the way that you responded."

Beloved, just thinking about things of a political nature and what seems to be the increasing hostility of the world toward Christians, do you understand that we're really pretty much indifferent to that? That we don't need to get all wrapped up in what's happening politically as if our destinies and our well-being was wrapped up in what happened in the political world around us? We've got to stop thinking that way. That is irrelevant to true Christians because our destiny, our hope, our joy, is bound up in the Lord Jesus Christ and the Lord cannot take that away and that's why these Thessalonian believers were joyful. They said, "We received the Gospel. Oh yeah, there's opposition to

it and we suffer at the point of it but that is secondary to the fact that we have found the truth, the truth has delivered us from our sins and we have a certain hope of eternal life and being delivered from the wrath that is to come. That is the defining aspect of our lives and of our spiritual experience."

So why is it that we wallow in the ups and downs of the daily news? The Thessalonians received the word in the midst of serious difficulty and they manifested joy and gladness nonetheless. You see, that wasn't just them, that's the way God's people live. That is to be the mark of every one of us. It is our privilege to know that. It is our privilege to live that way and it is also our duty. It is our responsibility to respond to the God who has saved us, to respond to him in this way. Trials are the common lot for Christians and it is wrong and it is selfish for us to want to avoid them. If Christ could carry his cross up the road to Calvary to suffer for us, is it too much for us to go through a few years of difficulty in this life as we follow in his footsteps? Would he bear the cross and we would only want the crown? No. No, let us recognize the spiritual responsibility that we have. Be mindful of the realm into which we have been delivered and to rejoice in it and to be glad to share in the sufferings with Christ rather than being anxious or resentful for them. Here the Thessalonians are in the midst of hostility, in the midst of being grossly misrepresented to the authorities who had the ability to persecute them, nevertheless this church had joy and that's not just reserved for people going through persecution. It's for people going through the kinds of trials that you and I are going through here today. It should be the ongoing pattern of the Christian life.

Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:16 where Paul is laying out what he wants from these people, Paul speaking as the authorized representative of the Lord Jesus Christ. God's word says to us, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." So, beloved, settle in your mind, make it your conviction right now in response to the clear authority of God's word that in the midst of your challenges, in the midst of your delayed aspirations, in the midst of the uncertainty that lies ahead in life, that you are not going to be one who gives in to despair. You are not going to be one who gives in to anxiety and fretfulness and resentment or a spirit of retaliation against those who have wronged you. We see Paul commending these believers who in the midst of persecution and those who lied against them and betrayed them and wickedly sold them out to the secular authorities, Paul says, "You were joyful in the midst of that. You manifested a gladness that showed you valued Christ more than your earthly surroundings." Paul says, "I commend you for that," and in commending them for it, he sets the pattern for us to follow in our own lives.

We can live this way, beloved. You can live this way. You don't have to be a complaining, grouchy person in the midst of your trials. You don't have to be a fearful, retiring person shrinking back from life when you know Christ. You're called to glory. You're called to battle. You're called to prosper in the midst of it in the sense of prospering spiritually and manifesting joy that is borne out of being in union with Christ and having the living Holy Spirit dwelling within you. Christ paid your ransom and the best for you and me is still to come.

Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:10 where Paul said, actually in verse 9, he says, "You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." You belong to a Lord who has rescued you from the wrath that is to come. That is what informs your joy. That is the unshakeable foundation upon which you can stand. While we sympathize with one another in our struggles, while we weep with those who weep, beloved, recognize that underlying that is a call to God upon your heart that says, "Trust me and love me and find your satisfaction in me to such an extent, to such an overriding value, that you're glad and that you're joyful simply because you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ," and that that becomes the principle, that becomes the possession that you so treasure that informs everything else in life rather than letting your discouragements and uncertainties inform and cloud the way that you view Christ. It's a matter of what the starting point of your perspective is and, Christian brother, Christian sister, you belong to Christ. You belong to the King. He has been gracious to you and he hasn't stopped being gracious to you and he will never stop being gracious to you. In that you rejoice. You, in your trials, can manifest joy and not despair.

Question: are there other virtues from the Lord that we can seek out and that we can aim our aspirations in the midst of our trials? Absolutely. Point 2 here this morning and I know that many of you need to hear this today: your trials can bring courage, not fear. Your trials can bring courage, not fear. The persecution that Paul experienced and he outlines that in many places in his letters of the beatings and the sufferings and the hunger and the deprivation that he experienced, being shipwrecked, spending a night in the sea, all of those things, the imprisonments, all of it, all of that persecution, all of that opposition, the weight of a satanic world riled up against him, all of it, I should say none of it was effective to silence him, rather it only increased his determination. The opposition and the trials and the difficulties became like wind underneath the wings of a bird that lifted him higher and higher rather than driving him down and pushing him into the ground. The opposition became that which gave soar to his soul, if I can put it that way.

Look at chapter 2, verses 1 and 2. I love this and the more I reflect on it, the more I just find it giving strength to my own heart in ministry. 1 Thessalonians 2:1, Paul says, "For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain." Notice what he's doing here: he's appealing to their personal knowledge of the way that he responded to his difficulties and what happened. He said, "You know this." In fact, it's an emphatic thing, "You yourselves know this. I am appealing to that which was in your direct personal experience with what I'm about to describe." So what he was saying here in what follows was utterly undeniable. It was a matter of factual historical record that what he was saying was true.

Verse 1, he says, "our coming to you was not in vain," verse 2, "but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition." He says, "You know that we were bold." Perhaps they were still carrying some of the physical marks of the hostility that they had encountered, I don't know. But they knew that he had suffered when he

came into their midst and was he retiring? Was he weak? Was he fearful? Did he shrink back? Paul says, "You know we were bold when we proclaimed the Gospel. The suffering didn't cause us to retreat in fear, instead we were all the more outspoken. We were all the more courageous in the midst of the hostility." And he says, notice, look back at verse 2 here. We like to keep our eyes close to the text at Truth Community Church. Paul says, "we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition." He's saying that, "Our courage came from the sphere of God's provision. We were bold in our God," is a way of saying, "we were conscious of the fact that God was with us in our difficulties. He was with us to bless us in our struggles and therefore we had confidence that the world could not overcome us and it gave us a supernatural courage that cannot be explained by human motivations." God strengthened Paul as he suffered.

He said elsewhere, didn't he, in 2 Corinthians 12, he said, "He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'" That which is making you feel weak, beloved, is the instrument of your strength. It is the instrument that causes you to look beyond yourself, to look to the God who saved you and to find in him the spiritual resources that completely change the dynamics of your heart. And those of you that are gripped with uncertainty and anxiety and discouragement and depression, I say this sympathetically but I need to say it clearly to call you out of that: when your mind sinks into that pit, you are losing sight of your God. You are losing sight of his provision. You have lost sight of his faithfulness and his goodness to you. You have lost sight of the big picture.

Paul says, "The suffering made us bold. It made us courageous." I understand the desire to want relief from your trial. I understand that human sentiment that says, "This is so hard. I just want it to go away." But beloved, what you need to understand is that when you're a Christian you are to have higher motivations than that. Your trial is an occasion for you to courageously trust Christ. To boldly give glory to God. To boldly trust him even when you don't know what's going to happen next and not give in to the fear and discouragement is always knocking on the door of your heart trying to get in. You don't answer that door. You don't let that in. You don't submit to the fear. You come back to the realm of God's provision for you and find, "Oh, God has already given me all that I need to prosper in this. You have forgiven my sins in Christ. The Spirit lives within me. I have an all-sufficient word that directs me in the midst of these things. I have a future hope that can never be taken away from me," and you draw upon those resources. You look beyond the affliction to God's strength in your hardship. You see, what should be happening to you in your life in the midst of your sorrow and difficulty is not that it clouds your vision and makes things fuzzy as it is for me when I look on you without my glasses, rather you put on the spectacles of God's provision so that things become clear and you see things with a clarity and the difficulty and the uncertainty sharpens your perspective, sharpens your focus on God, sharpens your commitment and your devotion and your love for Christ and say, "I have a refuge that is worth more than all the world could ever give me in its best of days. A day at the door of the temple of God is worth a thousand outside it," the Psalmist said. Well, that's what your trials are supposed to do to you, beloved, sharpen your perspective, bring things into focus. When it does and when

your mind is reoriented to the things of your salvation, then courage comes as a result of it.

Now, Martyn Lloyd Jones has helpfully illustrated the fact that to be a Christian and to live by faith is not to have a spiritual thermostat inside your heart that just automatically adjusts and rises and falls to the occasion of life as if it were something that were passive that you don't have to do anything about. No, it doesn't work that way. We're not adjusted to a room temperature. You have the responsibility to think on these things. To call them to mind. To remind yourself of what it is that you believe and to pay heed to it and to stir up your own heart as the Psalmist said when he was downcast. He said, "Why are you downcast, my soul? Trust in God for I shall still praise Him." Well, so it is for us today. In the midst of your discouragement you should be talking to yourself. You should be calling out to yourself, "Why are you downcast? Trust in God. Remember your God," you say to yourself. Preach to yourself and remind yourself of these things that you might awaken the faith that is in your heart.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you remember what Jesus said? You say, "He said a lot of things. Could you be more specific?" Of course I can. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation," so we don't expect to be exempt from it. "But," he said, "take courage. I have overcome the world." And in the midst of the tribulation, we remember the fact that Christ forewarned us. He said, "It will be like this: in this world, it's going to be difficult so don't expect anything different. Don't expect to avoid it, rather instead, be courageous. Take heart and remember that I, your Captain, have gone before you and have won over this world and my victory I gladly share with you." You see, Jesus told us in advance and he said that you don't need to be afraid even in the most uncertain of times. You don't need to collapse in fear. You don't have to surrender to your doubts, in fact, you shouldn't. You should not accept that from your heart, rather you stir yourselves up by remembering the provision of God and the promise of Christ and the future hope that belongs to us and you're refreshed in Christ and you're mindful of the fact that you're not living for this world anyway and that if Christ is with you, all else pales in comparison and importance.

So the word of God calls us to joy and it calls you to rise to the occasion of your present discouragement with courage based on the promises of Christ. Well, can we go beyond even joy and courage? Could there possibly be more for us to manifest? More for us to draw upon? More to find our spiritual purpose in? Yes, as a matter of fact there is. Point 3 here this morning and I know that some of you need to hear this: your trials can bring gentleness, not grumbling. Your trials can bring gentleness, not grumbling. How often is it that our difficulties make us grouchy, downcast and complaining usually within the sphere of those that are closest to us? We can put on a good face for an hour and a half on Sunday, I get that, but what I'm getting to and what I'm addressing is that grouchy, irritable spirit that you and I sometimes fall into, some more often than others, in the midst of painful conditions, painful circumstances that we don't like. Look, it doesn't have to be that way, in fact, it should not be that way for the true professing Christian. You don't have to be a grouch. This may surprise some of you. You don't have to be a grouch. You don't have to be a pain in the neck to the people that are closest to you

because you're uncomfortable with other circumstances in your life. You can manifest godliness in your trials.

Look at what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, we'll go to. Remember he had just spoken about the opposition that they had faced. We're mindful, it's fresh in our minds that Paul was a man who suffered for the Gospel. His circumstances outwardly were almost always adverse and so did it make him a grouch? Did it make him a pain in the neck to be around? Was he unpleasant so that people preferred to be outside away from him rather than being in close association with him because difficulty had made him demanding and unyielding and unbending and unforgiving and demanding? I said that twice, didn't I? That's okay, it makes the point. What was Paul like in the midst of this? Verse 7, he says, "We proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us." Look at this, beloved, in the midst of what we're talking about, in the context of saying, "How is it that we respond to suffering in our lives?" look at the spiritual attitudes that Paul describes as being manifested in his life and this was no empty boast. This was no false bravado on his part. He was writing to the people and he says, "You know what we were like when we were with you. Let me remind you."

Look at the words that he uses: we were gentle like a nursing momma; we cared for you with tenderness like a mom with her children; we were affectionate toward you; we were well pleased to impart our lives to you. Why? Because you were so dear to us. The outward affliction didn't make him bitter toward those that were closest to him, instead it had the reverse impact. It was a mark of the supernatural presence of the Holy Spirit in his life that that which would subdue other men, those without Christ, became the occasion upon which he manifested the sweetest of spiritual aromas to those who were closest to him. "We shared out lives with you and what did you find? You found that it was gentle and affectionate and caring."

That's the way it's supposed to be for true Christians and I ask you, we need to get down to the nitty-gritty here, beloved, I ask you: how many of you are barking at your spouse? How many of you are barking at your kids? Lashing out at the people that are closest to you in proximity? Don't you hate it when the Spirit of God aims an arrow right at your heart and it finds its mark? The convicting power of God's word? Well, if you're convicted, you need to be and you need to see that that pattern of life in you is not acceptable. This is not Christian living and if it is an engrained pattern, an unbroken pattern in your life, you might need to reexamine whether you are a Christian or not. Let me drop the qualifier: you do need to examine whether you're a Christian or not. If that kind of grouchy, sour demeanor is the constant mark of your life because it's certainly not the mark of the Holy Spirit whose fruit is love, joy, peace, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. Paul was weary and yet he displayed loving attitudes toward the people at Thessalonica.

You see, we see these things and we realize that there is an aspirational aspect to it and say, "Oh, I can be this way. You mean, I can actually live a more godly life without my

circumstances changing?" Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. Isn't that glorious? To realize that you don't need anything outside of your control to change in order for you to manifest godliness if you're a true Christian. I think that's one of the most wonderful aspects of being a Christian. The circumstances do not have to change for you to be godly, for you to be like this. Everything that you need has already been given to you in the person of Christ. He is sufficient for us. You need nothing else in order to manifest this kind of life. These can be your spiritual aspirations. It makes me want to change and say, "You know, I want to be like this. I want to be more like what Paul describes than what marks my life from time to time." At the same time, while it's aspirational and it's encouraging, at the same time, beloved, it's not going to do you any good to hear any of this if you don't take responsibility for your own bad attitudes and declare them and admit them in the presence of God and in the presence of men, "That is wrong for me to be that way and I need to repent because Christ has called me to so much more. How can I be downcast and discouraging and grumbling when I say that I have been saved by such a wonderful Savior as the Lord Jesus? One who is sweeter to me than honey! More precious to me than gold! And he owns me and he cares for me and he keeps me and I'm a grouch? Oh God," you say. You go to God in prayer and you say, "Oh God, where did I get so off track that I've been like this? Father, forgive me. I repent. I want to be like what Paul modeled because in following and imitating Paul, I see what Christ was like. Gentle in his hardship. Courageous. Joyful."

You young people in your teens, you young parents on the front end of life, let me say this so that you would take it to heart: your early years are setting the pattern for what you will become. You know, we've all known men and women who were bitter in their old age. They were a sad and pathetic shell of a person in their old age. Well, if you don't want to end up like that, understand that you cultivate contentment in your youth. If you feed resentment and bitterness in your life now, what you take in and what you dwell upon is what you are becoming and if you are cultivating that bitter, angry, grouchy attitude, you're on your path to becoming a bitter, grouchy old man. What a pity. What a shame for someone who names the name of Christ when gentleness and courage and joy are available for us who would pursue it in him.

So your trials can bring gentleness, not grumbling. You say, "But you don't know how bad it is. You haven't walked a mile in my moccasins." I don't have to. Look, I really don't have to. Everybody understands. We all understand that trials are outwardly unpleasant. They come in different packages and they're diverse in the difficulty that they bring but every one of us has outwardly unpleasant circumstances to one degree or another. Have we suddenly encountered a barrier that keeps us from joy, courage and gentleness? Only if Christ hasn't overcome the world. Yes, that's true if Christ is still in the tomb. If Christ has not gone before us and given us provision, yes, that's true we have every reason to be despairing and downcast. Is that the Christ that you believe in? Do you believe in a dead and buried Christ whose body is still in the tomb? Do you believe in a Christ who hasn't sent the Holy Spirit upon his people to be a blessing to them? Do you believe in a Christ who isn't holding his people to bless them throughout all of eternity and throughout all the eternal ages of heaven? If that's your Christ, of course you're despairing. That's not the Christ of the Bible though. No, we believe in a Christ who is

resurrected. Who reigns at the right hand of the Father ever to intercede for his people. We live in the realm of a Christ who has said we will see him face to face and one day we will be like him. Who says he is with us in our trials and will never leave us as orphans.

When your focus comes upon Christ and you remember him as you should, then joy and courage and gentleness flow out of it. "Let the world pass me by. Let the world shower me with its blows and its deception and its misrepresentations of me. Let my physical body go to waste. I belong to Christ and that is the supernatural, surpassing value from which I derive my spiritual existence and so, of course, I'm joyful. Of course, I feel courage. Of course, I can be gentle with men. Don't you realize who I belong to?" That kind of response is unusual even in Christian circles. The fact that maybe you don't even see it in the Christians around you, don't let that discourage you. You be different. You be the one who leads the charge in manifesting this and exemplifying it before the world. Say, "The men around me may not be like this but I will be." That's the courage, that's the commitment, that's the aspiration that comes to one who understands the surpassing value and worth of Christ and treasures him above all else.

Now, what knowledge undergirds such a godly response? How is it that we can embrace that? Well, let me say a couple of things. It's certainly not going to be possible if you believe that your trials come from Satan. If you think that Satan is inflicting these things upon you, that you're going to view them as coming from a wicked source that discourages you and weighs you down. It's a little better to say that, "Oh, well God has allowed this in my life." That's a little better. At least there's a God-centered definition to it but it's not enough. To say that God has allowed suffering in your life, you're almost tempted to think, "Well, somehow he turned against me. He allowed it and stepped back and for reasons I can't understand now I'm in sorrow." No. No, we need to go further than even that to where the Bible takes us and to recognize this fourth point. How is it that you can manifest a godly response of joy and courage and gentleness? You have to embrace this fourth point: your trials come from God. Your trials come from God. God has appointed you for the circumstances that you're living in right now. He has appointed your circumstances for you. Somehow in one way or another, our God who is in providential control of every detail in the universe, the life that you have right now is the life that God has for you. To say anything else is to deny the sovereignty of God and we don't do that here because the Scriptures don't do that.

Let's back up a bit. The Bible does not promise ease to us. It is a horrific lie perpetrated from more pulpits than not that God simply wants to relieve you from your trials and all you need to do is ask him and life will get better for you. What a demonstrably false and misleading picture of the Christian life. Paul walked through persecution and practically died alone. Are we better than Paul?

Let's take it further: what about the Lord Jesus at the end of his earthly life? Nailed to a cross. Betrayed by his closest disciples. Eventually even the Father turning away from him. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" And the champion went forward? The champion went before us as a man of sorrows acquainted with grief and we would say, "That's not for me. God, I'd appreciate it if you'd just excuse me from that aspect of

life that my Savior went through." What strand of godliness is defining that attitude? There is none.

No. No, Scripture says that man is born for trouble as the sparks fly upward. You've been at campfires, right? The log turns over, drops and the sparks fly up. Troubles are going to spark up in our lives. We just come to expect that. We understand it. We embrace it and we understand we're not living for this world anyway. It's not about this world. Scripture says that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Well, Paul addresses this aspect of the trials in 1 Thessalonians 3:3. Let's start in verse 2. 1 Thessalonians 3:2, here he's defending his apostolic love and care for the Thessalonians even though he wasn't physically present with them and he said, "we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions." Why not? "Paul, we're afflicted. You're afflicted. How can we not be upset about that?" Paul says, "you yourselves know that we have been destined for this." This was appointed for us by God. Verse 4, "For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know."

Paul says we were destined for affliction. This is part of the package so we don't need to be thrown off as if some strange thing were happening to us. We don't need to wonder and question and doubt and collapse under the weight of what's happening. This is all part of God's plan. He designed this. He destined us for affliction. Scripture says in Acts 14:22 that God appointed us to enter his kingdom through many tribulations. So brothers, sisters, your hardship is not some strange thing that is outside the plan of God. This is part of it. It's part of living in a fallen world. It's part of walking in the footsteps of a suffering Savior and we can embrace it because Christ is with us and we can embrace it when we understand that God has destined us for such a life as this.

You know, I think back on some of the worst sorrows that I ever went through long ago. My life right now is pretty placid, pretty calm. It probably won't always be that way but I remember the turbulent waters of the past. How much it would have helped me to understand then what I didn't know at that time is that even the stormiest of waves, even the most crashing of tides, God brings those to us in order to accomplish his purposes in our lives and that foreknowledge lets you rise to the occasion. Jesus said, "I'm telling you in advance, you will have tribulation in this world." It's a waste of time to wish that it were any differently. It's not different. It is what it is and so the question is, "Okay, well, now what do I do with it? Do I fall into despair and doubt and discouragement?" Honestly, beloved, let's just be honest with each other: is that the life that God has called you to? Is that what Christ saved you for? As you read the word of God, is that the picture of the Christian life that is given to you? I ask you: yes or no? Yes or no. Someone answer. No. Hey, good, thank you. Free stickers for you after the service. I have those in my folder. Ask the kids about that.

No. That is not the life that God has called us to and so, you say, "I'm in affliction here." Okay, this is what God has determined and planned for you. Okay, next issue, "How then shall I respond? I think I'll be depressed." Why? Why? Why would you be depressed

when Scripture clearly lays out that there is a life of joy and courage and gentleness for you? You see, I want to do everything in my human powers aided by the Holy Spirit to make you see that that's not only the way it shouldn't be, that's not even desirable. It doesn't have to be that way and so, beloved, what you and I do as Christians is we reject a sense of entitlement to a life of ease. We reject that. We say, "No, that's not the case. It wasn't that way with my Lord and I'm not going to lay my head on a pillow when he laid his head on a rock." Your heavenly Father planned your salvation and the same gracious God who sent Christ to Calvary is the same gracious God who has designed the life that you have right now. He intends your good in it and you can trust him for that and when you trust his character, you can accept the trials.

One final point here this morning. Your trials come from God. Point number 5, kind of going back to the grouchy thing. Point number 5: your trials cannot excuse your sin. Your trials cannot excuse your sin. In their sorrow, Paul calls them to spiritual growth and duty. Look at chapter 4, verse 1. Remember, they are suffering and they had been persecuted and what does Paul do? He doesn't give them a spiritual pass, he calls them to higher ground. Chapter 4, verse 1, he says, "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality." He says, "I know that you're suffering but let me call you to higher ground and understand that in the midst of your suffering, in the midst of walking well, you need to excel still more and avoid sexual immorality." The greater point here for this morning is that he confronts them in their sin and calls them out of it even in the midst of their suffering. Look at verse 10, at the end of verse 10 he says, "we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need." One more, chapter 5, verse 6, he says, "let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."

Simple point here and all of this for your good and for your upbuilding and for your encouragement, beloved: trials do not suspend your responsibility to obey God. You still have to be obedient to Christ even in the midst of your trials and so we have to do away with the false logic that says, "I'm suffering and therefore I'm not going to put forth the effort. I'm suffering and therefore I'm going to let my spiritual guard down." No, quite to the contrary. Suffering then becomes that which says, "Oh, I need to be even more focused. I need to excel even still more," and you direct your spiritual energies toward spiritual growth rather than spiritual laziness.

Are you suffering this morning? Is life hard? God bless you. I mean, seriously, God bless you. May he send his favor upon you and comfort and encourage and sustain you in the midst of it. I appreciate the way so many of you are patiently walking through chronic difficulties with circumstances that won't change. You're doing the right thing. May God bless you in it. For some of you, I must say that self-pity does not excuse your sin. You must grow in Christ and excel still more. That's the call of God on our lives.

On March 22, 1758, Jonathan Edwards died at the young age of 54 from a failed smallpox vaccination and left a grieving family behind. It came on suddenly. It was a matter of a few days, a few short weeks maybe. But he had gone from being appointed the head of Yale to the grave. A few days later, his wife Sarah wrote the following words to their daughter Elizabeth. She said and I quote, "What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands on our mouths. The Lord has done it but my God lives and he has my heart. We are all given to God and there I am and love to be." Kiss the rod. In other words, embrace the hardship that your God has wisely brought into your life. Trust him. Submit to him. Don't give up in fear. Don't question God. No. No beloved, kiss the rod.

Let's bow in prayer.

*Lord, I ask that you would give grace to these brothers and sisters in Christ as they walk through their trials and for sinners here who are apart from Christ, use their trials to teach them their need for Christ. May they look to his blood atonement on the cross for forgiveness of sin and hand their lives over to a Savior and entrust themselves to your sovereign care. We pray in the name of the Lord Jesus who loved us and gave himself up for us. Amen.*