

Happy and Holy in a Hostile World – Part 3

1 Thessalonians 3; Coast School of Theology; Earl Miles; 12-1-2019

The Basics of the Christian Life (5 Chapters of 1 Thessalonians)

1. The Nature of True Conversion
2. The Nature of True Gospel Ministry
- 3. The Testing of Our Faith**
4. The Temptation of Life in a Fallen World
5. The Day of the Lord

What do we need to know to be happy and holy in a hostile world?

What do we need to know (and apply) when we are under persecution?

- That God is for us, not against us (because we are truly converted).
- That those who lead us to trust Christ are reliable witnesses (true gospel ministry).
- That we will have our faith tested and this is to be expected (testing of our faith).
- That we will be tempted to find an easier, more pleasurable lifestyle and escape (temptation in a fallen world).
- That one day evil and suffering will be judged and banished and we will be rewarded for our faithfulness (the Day of the Lord).

Disturbed by Destined Afflictions

Therefore when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen (establish) and encourage you as to your faith, ³ so that no one would be disturbed (agitate, flatter – ie, to be moved in some sense; moved away from the gospel here) by these afflictions (tribulations – pressures); for you yourselves know that we have been destined (ie, we have been laid) for this. ⁴ For indeed when we were with you, we *kept* telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction (that we are going to be pressed or oppressed); and so it came to pass, as you know.

- Sovereignty ('God's in charge') does not eliminate concern and action.
- Athens: Mars Hill sermon (Acts 17:16ff)
- Christianity 101: Expect suffering! (1 Peter 4:12)
- Gospel: good news of Christ
- Others can strengthen and encourage your faith.

- A ‘fellow worker’ with God means one who works as God works!
- Bottom line: what we need in the worst of situations is faith! (not escape)
- Promises in Scripture are not always positive; there are promises of trial and even judgment.
- Reason: establishment in the faith so that they aren’t moved away from the gospel.

Therefore when we could bear (endure) it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone,² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to **establish** and exhort you in your faith,³ that no one be **moved** by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. (ESV)

Suffering is difficult for everyone.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, said ‘God is dead’ meaning ...

Science had proven that there is no reason to need God to exist.

People had created the idea of God and life beyond death because

They wanted to find some reason for suffering.

They wanted to find a better world because they hated this one.

But the truth is that there is no meaning to suffering and life.

There is no better world.

There is no right and wrong.

There is only this world, filled with evil and suffering, so make the best of it.

Nietzsche’s father and grandfather had been Lutheran Pastors and he even began school to be a minister. But through a combination of ungodly influences and the death of his father and brother at an early age, he rejected any faith in God.

What disturbs us about afflictions as a Christian? Surprises us about it?

It is not supposed to be this way for a) a Christian or b) an obedient Christian.

So it raises questions about my standing with God: am I a Christian? Is God punishing me? Am I in sin?

It raises questions about God’s Word: is God keeping His promises to me? Is what God’s Word says, true?

Wielder of the knife: mugger? Surgeon?

Cross: ‘cursed are those who hang on a tree’

ABCs

- Agree with God about your sin and what it deserves.
- Believe in the Lord Jesus as able and willing Savior for you.
- Call on God for mercy (*rescue* from sin: the penalty and power and presence of sin and *reconciliation* to God).
- Devote yourself to the Word of God with the People of God (in baptism and church membership).
- Endure suffering and temptation to the end.

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil *one* comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. ²⁰ The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. ²² And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²³ And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.” – Matthew 13:18-23

¹¹ “Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. ¹² Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. ¹³ Those on the rocky *soil are* those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no *firm* root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. ¹⁴ The *seed* which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of *this* life, and bring no fruit to maturity. ¹⁵ But the *seed* in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance. – Luke 8:11-15

¹² 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; ¹³ but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. ¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. – 1 Peter 4:12-14

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; - 1 Peter 1:6-7

Temptation in Testing

⁵ For this reason, when I could endure (bear) *it* no longer, I also sent to find out (know) about your faith (belief/trust), for fear that (lest somehow) the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor (trouble) would be in vain (empty).

- Paul repeats his concern.

- Reason: fear that they had already been moved away from the gospel.
- ‘the tempter might have tempted you’ = ‘the tester might have tested you’ (same word can be translated either way)
- ‘faith’ = belief and trust (belief = doctrine/truth; trust = dependence/reliance)
- Dual use of trials: God uses them to test us for good and Satan uses them to tempt us for evil.
- What is the temptation: always unbelief and its fruit. (see the Garden of Eden)
- Our labor to minister the gospel is never in vain in the sense that God is glorified and His purposes accomplished whatever happens.
- But our labor to minister the gospel is vain or empty if it does not bear the fruit of justification or sanctification.

For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. (ESV)

How does Satan tempt us as God tests us?

To reject the goodness and sovereignty of God.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. – Romans 1:20

To disbelieve God and His Word.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden’?”² The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat;³ but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’”⁴ The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die!⁵ For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” – Genesis 3:1-5

- To compromise (like Chick-fil-a?)

In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil *one*. – Ephesians 6:16

To walk away from Christ.

- Like Josh Harris

Temptation of John Bunyan

‘When he thought that he was established in the gospel there came a season of overwhelming darkness following a terrible temptation when he heard the words, "sell and part with this most blessed Christ . . . Let him go if he will." He tells us that "I felt my heart freely consent thereto. Oh, the diligence of Satan; Oh, the desperateness of man's heart." For two years, he tells us, he was in the doom of damnation. "I feared that this wicked sin of mine might be that sin unpardonable." "Oh, no one knows the terrors of those days but myself." "I found it a hard work now to pray to God because despair was swallowing me up."

Then comes what seemed to be the decisive moment.

“One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today, and forever." Heb. 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God." – John Bunyan (quoted by John Piper in his short biography)

The temptation is not to ...

- Rest in Jesus
- Hope in God
- Pursue love according to God's Word

The Survival of Faith and Love

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us (have us in good remembrance), longing to see us just as we also long to see you, ⁷ for this reason, brethren, in all our distress (necessity) and affliction (tribulation; pressure) we were comforted (encouraged) about you through your faith; ⁸ for now we *really* live, if (contingency) you stand firm in the Lord.

- Good news: when people trust (faith) and obey God (love).
- The threat of affliction is the undermining of faith and love.
- An evidence of the survival of faith and love is a continued desire for that which is associated with faith and love (in this case, the apostles and their ministry of the Word)
- ‘distress and affliction’ seem to refer to the suffering caused by wondering about the Thessalonians faith!
- If so, then this highlights the reality that the suffering of others and the concern over the spiritual condition of others is part of the suffering of the Christian life! (2 Corinthians 11:28)
- ‘Now we live’ = figure of speech? ‘we were dying to know how you were and now we are relieved to hear that you’re doing well’?

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. (ESV)

What is harder? Suffering yourself? Or seeing those you love suffer?

What brings you comfort in affliction?

- When you see faith and love survive?
- When you endure, persevere?

How Jonathan Edwards Died by Fred Sanders on March 22, 2009

‘On March 22, 1758, Jonathan Edwards died in Princeton, New Jersey, from complications that set in after a smallpox vaccination. It was a surprising turn of events, right when Edwards thought he was starting an exciting new phase of his life’s work. He had moved to Princeton just a few months before, to assume the presidency of the college, and had been formally installed as president just weeks prior to his death. His wife Sarah hadn’t even moved the whole household from Massachusetts yet; two of his grown daughters already lived in Princeton and helped care for him.

‘There is an ancient Christian tradition of reflection on *ars bene moriendi*: the art of dying well. The theology of Jonathan Edwards was stern stuff, nourished by constant attention to Scripture and a shaped with a keen eye on God’s work in the world around him. It is good to be able to report that he died well, by all accounts.

‘As it became clear that he was going to die (the fever and throat constriction made him unable to eat or drink enough for subsistence), he called his daughter Lucy and said,

“Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue forever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now like to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you all to seek a Father, who will never fail you. And as to my funeral, I would have it be like Mr. Burr’s; and any additional sum of money that might be expected to be laid out that way, I would have it disposed of to charitable uses.

‘As death approached, some friends and relatives near his bedside were fretting over the terrible effect the death of the president would have on the college, and the loss to the American colonies that the passing of the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards would be. Nobody thought he was listening, but he said aloud, “Trust in God, and ye need not fear.”

‘Dr. William Shippen, the same doctor who had given him the lethal smallpox inoculation (and who would be a representative at the Continental Congress), attended him at his death, and sent the following letter to the widowed Sarah Edwards:

“This afternoon, between two and three o’clock, it pleased God to let him sleep in that dear Lord Jesus, whose kingdom and interest he has been faithfully and painfully serving all his life. And never did any mortal man more fully and clearly evidence the sincerity of all his professions, by one continued, universal, calm, cheerful resignation, and patient submission to the divine will, through every stage of his disease, than he; not so much as one discontented expression, nor the least appearance of murmuring, through the whole.

‘Soon enough, Sarah Edwards was writing to her daughter with these words of comfort and exhortation:

“My very dear Child, what shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud! ... The Lord has done it. He has made me adore His goodness that we had him so long. But my God lives: and He has my heart. Oh, what a legacy my husband and your father has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be.

‘There is much to be learned from the entire Edwards family, especially Jonathan and Sarah in their “uncommon union” of heart and mind, about the art of dying well, the art of grieving well, and the wise way to live when “a holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud.”

Incomplete Faith

⁹ For what thanks can we render to God for you in return (repay, recompense) for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, ¹⁰ as we night and day keep praying (to bind) most earnestly (exceedingly abundantly) that we may see your face, and may complete (mend, fit, perfect, prepare) what is lacking (needed, wanting) in your faith?

- ‘how can we thank God enough’
- ‘night and day’ = continually
- Suffering can expose ‘incomplete faith’
- Is this doctrinal knowledge?
- Add to the faith or mend the damaged faith?
- Bound to pray?

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? (ESV)

Do you see yourself as having an incomplete faith?

How?

What should we do about that?

Can an incomplete faith save? Yes!

Will an incomplete faith struggle more? Yes!

John Bunyan's Suffering in the Bedford Jail

“The parting with my Wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling of the Flesh from my bones; and that not only because I am somewhat too fond of these great Mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries and wants that my poor Family was like to meet with should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides; O the thoughts of the hardship I thought my Blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces. – John Bunyan

‘He quotes 2 Corinthians 1:9 where Paul says, "We had this sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God that raiseth the dead." Then he says,

“By this scripture I was made to see that if ever I would suffer rightly, I must *first* pass a sentence of death upon every thing that can be properly called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyment, and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. The *second* was, *to live upon God that is invisible*, as Paul said in another place; the way not to faint, is to "look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." – John Bunyan (quoted by John Piper)

Established in Holy Love

¹¹ Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct (lead, guide) our way to you;

¹² and may the Lord cause you to increase (superabound) and abound (be rich) in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you; ¹³ so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints (holy ones). – 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

- Prayer for a visit
- Prayer for abounding love
- Love for believers
- Love for unbelievers
- Holiness is not merely negative (not doing things that are wrong) but primarily positive (love = good works, obedience, doing what is right and wise and good)
- There is an ‘establishment’ in the faith that is imperfect (v. 2) and an ‘establishment’ in the faith that is perfect (here)
- Those ‘set apart’ become like God = holy love! (see 1 John 1, 4)

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (ESV)

What does holiness look like?

What does love look like?

What does holy love look like?

¹⁰ Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining *at the table* in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw *this*, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” ¹² But when Jesus heard *this*, He said, “*It is* not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” – Matthew 9:10-13

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads *of grain* and eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw *this*, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.” ³ But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, ⁴ how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? ⁶ But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ But if you had known what this means, ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” – Matthew 12:1-8

Holy love looks like Jesus!

To some, holiness is knowing who or what to reject.

To God, holiness is loving all, even when they reject you!

I believe the holier a man becomes, the more he mourns over the unholiness which remains in him. – Charles Spurgeon

Holiness provokes hatred. The greater the holiness the greater the human hostility toward it. It seems insane. No man was ever more loving than Jesus Christ. Yet even His love made people angry. His love was a perfect love, a transcendent and holy love, but His very love brought trauma to people. This kind of love is so majestic we can't stand it. – RC Sproul