

“Joyous Affliction”
1 Thessalonians 1:6
(Preached at Trinity, March 24, 2019)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Paul has been sharing his great gratitude for the powerful work of God's grace upon the Thessalonian converts. He was greatly encouraged by the testimony of their lives.
1 Thessalonians 1:3 NAU - "constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,"
2. Paul described their conversion experience:
 - a. How in the midst of a thoroughly pagan culture, they had abandoned their idols and turned to the living God.
1 Thessalonians 1:9 NAU - "how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,"
 - b. And in the midst of great opposition and personal affliction they had stood firm.
1 Thessalonians 1:6 NAU - "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,"
 - c. As the Gospel is brought before men they are faced with a choice. Will they receive it, or will they reject it? The lost man is in a state of enmity with God. He loves his sin and despises having his sin exposed.
John 3:16-20 NAU - "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."
3. The majority of fallen humanity will not respond positively towards the Gospel. In fact, just the opposite is true. Most respond negatively. This was Paul's experience in every city. It was true in Thessalonica.
Acts 17:1-5 NAU - "Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ 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." 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. 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"

1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 NAU - "For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, 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."

4. Even at great personal cost, however, some receive the Word. After leaving Thessalonica Paul described the Bereans who eagerly received the Word of God.

Acts 17:10-11 NAU - "The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see whether these things were so.*"

In the midst of the environment of vicious hatred of the Gospel, many will receive it with joy. They become imitators of Paul and all who receive Christ. This bears testimony to the power of the Gospel.

5. Suffering accompanies the Gospel. This seems strange in our hedonistic, pleasure seeking, self-centered culture. Suffering has always been the experience of those united with Christ.

Romans 8:16-18 NAU - "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. ¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

6. This was always Paul's consistent teaching. He preached the Gospel with joy and shared the wonders of life in Christ but never sought to underemphasize the hostility we can expect from the people of this world.

Acts 14:21-22 NAU - "After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

7. We can see this expressed over and over in the New Testament

2 Corinthians 8:1-2 NAU - "Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, ² that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality."

2 Thessalonians 1:4-5 NAU - "we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. ⁵ *This is* a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering."

8. In **Chapter 3** we'll see that we have been predestined to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

1 Thessalonians 3:3 NAU - "so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this."

9. Jesus described the blessedness of being counted worthy to suffer for His sake
Matthew 5:10-12 NAU - "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."
10. This morning as we consider this subject I want to set before you the Subjects of persecution, the Source of persecution, and the Serenity of those being persecuted.

I. The subjects of persecution

A. Those who receive the Gospel of Christ

"having received the word in much tribulation"

1. Receiving the Word means embracing the Gospel in its fullness
 It means receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord
 It means resting upon Him alone, obeying Him as Master and King
 Are you trusting in Him alone for your salvation?
2. Receiving the Word means identifying with Jesus in His fullness
 This is the meaning of Romans 10:13
 "Whoever will call upon the name of the LORD will be saved."
 To call upon the name of Christ is to embrace the fullness of His divine essence—all that He is.
3. To receive Christ is to identify with Him in every circumstance. It will demand that your life will often be contrary to the pattern of this world. This will often bring conflict.
Matthew 5:11 NAU - "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."
4. To identify with Christ also means identifying with His suffering
 Martin Luther wrote: "If Christ wore a crown of thorns, why should His followers expect only a crown of roses?"¹

B. Suffering for the sake of Christ is a normal part of Christianity.

Philippians 3:10-11 NAU - "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

1. Those who receive Christ are uniquely united to Him. Their hearts are filled with gratitude to Him. They desire to honor Him. They seek to obey Him in righteousness. This brings them into conflict with the people of this world.
2. It's not just being religious; it's those who reflect Christ in this God-hating world that face persecution.
2 Timothy 3:12 NAU - "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."
Matthew 5:10 NAU - "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

¹ Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13:46.

II. The source of persecution

- A. There is a profound difference between the Christian and the unbeliever
1. The world loves those who follow its ways
John 15:19 NAU - "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you."
 2. The world hates those who do not conform to its ways. They hate the righteous man.
1 John 3:13 NAU - "Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you."
- B. Fallen humanity despises Christ
1. They despise His reign. They despise His person. They see Jesus as a threat to all that they love.
 - a. The believer sees Jesus as altogether lovely
 - b. The unbeliever hates Jesus and hates His reign.
2 Timothy 3:4 KJV - "Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God"
 - c. These opposite poles are bound to cause friction, especially as the believer displays his love for Christ in how he lives.
 2. Not only do the lost hate Christ. They despise those who love Christ
John 15:18 NAU - "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you."
- C. The hatred of the lost towards Christians is only a reflection of the hatred of Satan. To identify with Jesus Christ puts you in direct conflict with Satan and all of the forces of evil.
1. You become the target of Satan. He has you in his sights and has determined to destroy everything in you that identifies with Christ.
 2. He is described as a roaring lion stalking the righteous
 3. Satan is the driving force behind the persecutions
Ephesians 6:11-12 NAU - "Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*."
- D. Sadly, there is another source of the persecution upon Christians. Sadly some of the fiercest persecution upon Christians has come from the hand of religious people.
1. The Pharisees thought they were doing service to God
 2. The early church contained individuals who opposed sound teaching
3 John 1:9-10 NAU - "I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. ¹⁰ For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire *to do so* and puts *them* out of the church."

Philippians 1:15-17 NAU - "Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment."

3. The same continues today. Pastoral opposition most often comes from within the church.

2 Timothy 4:2-4 NAU - "preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

III. The serenity in the midst of persecution

1 Thessalonians 1:6 NAU - "having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,"

A. Difficult circumstances are difficult to receive

1. All of us want to enjoy a quiet and peaceful life, free from difficulty and opposition. We should pray for it.
1 Timothy 2:1-2 NAU - "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity."
2. No one wants rejection. Paul lamented his abandonment by the brethren
2 Timothy 4:16 NAU - "At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them."
3. The great paradox of Christianity is we can receive affliction with joy. We've seen this in the life of Paul – he knew joy in the midst of affliction.
Acts 16:23-25 NAU - "When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴ and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them;"
4. The Christian finds contentment in Christ in every earthly circumstance
Philippians 4:11-13 NAU - "Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹² I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." – "I can do all things" means "I can endure every circumstance."

- B. This demands a profound change in our heart
1. The Holy Spirit works joy, peace, and patience within our heart
 2. Paul calls it the “joy of the Holy Spirit” – **Verse 6**
 3. We are to live our lives as a reflection of Jesus Christ in us.
The Thessalonian Christians were imitators of Paul who was an imitator of Christ who endured His suffering with joy.
Hebrews 12:1-2 NAU - "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Conclusion:

1. Persecution isn't a strange anomaly for the Christian. It is the norm.
1 Thessalonians 1:6 NAU - "having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,"
2. God has often used persecution to strengthen the church.
In an interview with a Chinese leader he was asked how American Christians might pray for the church in China. His response was:
“Stop praying for persecution in China to end, for it is through persecution that the church has grown. In fact, we are praying that the American church might taste the same persecution, so revival would come to the American church like we have seen in China.”²
3. Gary Demarest writes: “To rediscover the call of Christ as a call to sacrifice and suffering must become the highest priority for American Christians. We must be freed from our captivity to the cultural assumptions of “the good life.” The chains of our bondage to the crass materialism and the flagrant self-centeredness of our generation must be broken. Perhaps one of the most completely concealed truths of our time is that suffering and joy go together. Life without problems and suffering is a fantasy and is not worth pursuing. If we live as followers of Jesus in the midst of a fallen world, a world at war with God and itself, we will suffer. But suffering will not break us or lessen our confidence in God. On the contrary, suffering for what we know in Jesus will only draw us closer to God.”³

² Jimmy Draper: <http://www.bpnews.net/42677/call-to-prayer-persecution-from-a-chinese-christians-perspective>

³ Gary W. Demarest and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *1, 2 Thessalonians / 1, 2 Timothy / Titus*, The Preacher's Commentary Series, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1984), 32:44–45.