

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

The Profit of Pain

Christ Church Liverpool

Theme: Suffering as a Christian shows you have received God's powerful word. Stopping Christians gospelling shows you are receiving God's terrible wrath.

Aim: Be encouraged in your suffering, fight all hindrances to gospel speaking.

It was a sunny Tuesday morning in Thessalonica. Jason sat under his peristyle, looking out over the garden enjoying his plate of salted bread, raisins and cheese; like many Thessalonians he had grown fond of this typically Roman breakfast. It was pretty much typical of the daily routine he had followed for years. But, as he looked at the now empty alcoves in the wall opposite, where his idols had stood until two weeks ago he was reminded just how different life was now.

His preaching about Jesus had changed Jason's life. The constant low-level fear that the gods would reach out and destroy his life was gone, replaced by a confidence that there was one God who ruled the universe. The certainty that death was the end had been replaced by a knowledge that his body would rise, like Jesus', from the grave. The sense of anxiety that his offerings might not be sufficient to cover his failures had been replaced by an understanding that Christ's death on the cross eternally covered all his wickedness, moral weakness and wrongdoing.

Becoming a Christian had changed Jason's life. He had Paul to thank for that.

Suddenly Jason became aware of a commotion in the street outside. Running feet, shouting, hammering on a door – his door! But not for long. The door flew off its hinges under the crush of the crowd and suddenly his peaceful garden was swarmed with angry men. He just about had time to recognise a couple of career bad-boys from the marketplace and get to his feet before someone shoved him from behind and he fell face first onto the stone floor, with only time to put one hand out to save himself. He heard the crack as the radius snapped at the weak point where it widens (that's a Colles fracture for anyone who needs to revise their anatomy). Then the pain shifted rapidly from hand to head as he was lifted by his hair and dragged, with occasional punching and kicking, to the main square, where the city officials were assembled.

It wasn't really clear who was in charge of this mob; the voices rang out from different corners as if they wanted to stay in the shadows. "These Christians have caused trouble all over the word," someone said. "And now Jason has welcomed them into his house," came a

second voice. "They say Caesar isn't really the king and that some bloke called Jesus is going to take over," added a third.

It took quite a while to sort it all out and it cost Jason a good amount in bail money, which he never saw again. Next morning as he ate his breakfast he could only use one arm, he was looking out over a ruined garden, he was thousands of pounds worse off, and he had been ostracised by almost everyone in town apart from the other Christians.

Meanwhile Paul and his friends who had first persuaded Jason that the message about Jesus was THE truth about God had been bundled off to Berea.

Well I don't know what Jason's house layout was or what he had for breakfast. But he was a real man, who really lived in Thessalonica in the first century, who really became a Christian when Paul preached about Jesus and who really was violently dragged through the streets and forced to pay up to be freed on bail despite committing no crime.

That pattern of rejection and exclusion was repeated dozens of times in Thessalonica and has been repeated millions of times in the 2,000 years since. So it's no surprise that the reality of persecution is one of the things that often makes Christians question the reality of the spiritual experience they have had.

How can the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God who sends his Holy Spirit in power, the God who promises to resurrect our bodies to eternal life, allow his beloved people to be downtrodden, hassled, beaten or rejected? Unless, of course, that God doesn't really exist at all?

For the apostle Paul, however, pain, the pain of suffering for being a Christian, isn't a problem for Christians but a profit.

Because in the four verses of 1 Thessalonians we are looking at this morning Paul explains that as he hears about their struggles Christians from his friend Timothy, he sees their suffering for Christ not as a sign of defeat but as a ground for confidence that they really have believed a message which is really true. And as he watches the efforts of unbelievers to stop Paul and the Thessalonians sharing the good news about Jesus, he sees this not as a sign of the power of the world but as the outpouring of God's judgment.

Let's think, in turn, about each of three groups of people Paul has a message for this morning:

1 **Opposed Christian: be encouraged.**

For some people here this morning being a Christian at work is incredibly difficult. Your colleagues don't just think you have an odd hobby (which is how most people in most workplaces feel about Christians). No, for some people here, your colleagues think your Christian faith is actually evil. Perhaps you have a gay colleague who has got the totally wrong idea from the media that Christians are homophobic who encourages everyone to treat you like you're in the BNP.

For some people here this morning being a Christian in your family is incredibly difficult. Your parents don't just think you're going through a religious phase. They think you are being brain washed. They think that considering being a Ministry Trainee or going on mission overseas is a waste of your talent and the money they spent on your education, so they signal disapproval in every way they can.

For some people here this morning being a Christian in your social circle is incredibly difficult. Your mates don't think someone who won't get drunk is just quirky. They think you are weak. And they think you are passing a judgment of your own superiority on them by smugly drinking diet coke as they down another round of Carlsberg. So they still get you to come out because they want a chauffeur, but they exclude you more and more from the real life of the group.

Sometimes, when you are in those situations, it seems pathetic to find them hard because you know there are Christians in the world who are actually imprisoned or even tortured for their faith. So you feel doubly discouraged; worn down by the struggle of being a Christian in your situation and also vaguely guilty that you find such relatively minor opposition so difficult.

If that's you this morning let me say to you that you are exactly the kind of Christian Paul thanks God for.

If you are being opposed in your workplace, family or circle of friends because you are a Christian then you are an imitator of God's churches in Judea, v14, the very first Christian churches. Those churches were the original ones. They were full of people who had actually met Jesus. They were the churches where John and Peter and James went. They were the churches everyone agreed were genuine and authentic. So Paul is encouraged by anyone who imitates, v14, those first Christians.

The word 'imitators' Paul uses here is a passive word. Paul isn't telling the Thessalonians, or us, that we should go out and actively try and get persecuted. But he is saying that in circumstances where just living the

Christian life means people give you a hard time for being a Christian you should be reassured.

Why should oppose Christians be reassured? The answer is in v13. Our willingness to follow Jesus despite opposition proves that we have accepted the message that Paul brought not as a human message but as a message from God. How do I know that I really think the message about Jesus comes directly from God? If I am willing to suffer for it.

The thing about other people's philosophies and teachings is that I can pick and choose from them. If I read a book on how meditation techniques can help my life then, if I'm sensible, I'll try the various things in it and just stick with the bits that work for me. If I read a book on Marxist economics I'll believe the bits that seem logical to me and bin off the rest. That's sensible; those books are written by human beings and they have no authority to tell me what to believe.

But it can't be like that with a message from God. If I believe that the message about Jesus, the gospel Paul preaches, is the word of God then I will accept in its entirety. If I believe that what Christianity teaches is not just 'a good idea' but God's eternal plan of rescue for the world I won't sidestep or deny that message just because it seems not to be working for me.

How do I know that I really think the message about Jesus comes directly from God? If I take it as a whole, even the bits that don't seem to work. And the clearest and best test of that is suffering.

If I am willing to undergo hardship and opposition from other people in my workplace, family and friends for this gospel it is a most powerful piece of evidence that I have accepted the message about Jesus as it really is – the living and powerful word of God. When Christians stick with believing in Jesus despite opposition it says something very powerful. It is a reassurance, a sign that you really have accepted the message about Jesus as the word of God.

But such behaviour in the face of opposition doesn't just speak to the Christian being persecuted. It also says something powerful, and disturbing, to their oppressor...

2 **Opponents of Christ: be warned.**

At first sight the people of Jerusalem who persecuted the Christians in Judea and the people of Thessalonica who persecuted Christians there don't seem to have very much in common.

- The Jewish hierarchy hated Roman rule and all that it stood for.
- The Thessalonian rulers had embraced Rome and become a staunch ally.

- The Jewish leaders despised Christianity because it said that God had a Son.
- The Thessalonian pagans despised Christianity because it said there was only one God.
- The Jewish leaders thought Christianity was a pagan abomination.
- The pagan leader thought Christianity was an aggressive new Judaism.

But, although their motivations were different, their ambition was the same: both Jewish and pagan leaders and their people wanted to stop people becoming Christians. Just like generations of Israelites, who executed the prophets God had sent with his word, the people of Judea and Thessalonica tried to hinder the spread of the good news about Jesus using any means possible.

Still today people who have very little in common are united in their desire to stop people hearing about and believing in Jesus Christ.

The Guardian reading intellectual who says that doing evangelism amongst Muslims is violating their culture is in complete agreement with the Iranian Ayatollah's and their fundamentalist Muslim friends who say Christians shouldn't be allowed to evangelise Muslims.

The British lawmakers who, under the cloak of the false god of tolerance, restrict the right of people in public sector jobs to talk openly about Jesus Christ to pupils and patients are united with the communists of the 20th century who closed down churches and the fascists who shot pastors.

It is in the nature of people with influence or money or power in our society, to try and stop the good news of Jesus Christ being proclaimed.

The forces of power in our world, our culture and our city are opposed to the spread of the gospel. Because the gospel subverts all earthly claims to power. The gospel is a threat to unbelieving Muslim Imams and Roman Catholic Priests and Members of Parliament and High Court Judges and investment bankers and global multinationals because it says that Jesus Christ is Lord and God.

All sorts of people who despise each other are united in hindering us from freely proclaiming the good news of Jesus to the world. Those people should be warned.

There is probably no more disturbing pronouncement in all of Paul's letter than v16. As these pagan opponents of the Thessalonians, like the Jewish opponents of the Christian church in Judea, work to try and stop the message about Christ from going out they are filling up a massive vat of sin.

One day it will all come crashing down in terrible eternal damnation, but even now, Paul says, God's judgment is seen on those who try and stop Christians talking about Jesus. You can see that God's wrath is already on those people because they are trying to silence the only message that can rescue them.

Sadly the kind of people who really don't like Christians talking about Jesus aren't likely to be here this morning. But we do all meet such people. And when we do we need to remember that trying to silence the gospel is the most terrible sin they can commit. So we need to do everything in our power to help them avoid doing that. We need to keep speaking about Jesus whatever happens.

And we need to remember that when people do prevent us from sharing the gospel with others God is going deal with it. Jason and his Thessalonian friends didn't need to go round and smash up the houses of those bad characters from the market place. They didn't need to refuse to do business with the Jewish men who started the riot in the first place. Instead they needed to carry on appealing to them to repent because the wrath of God against such sin is too appalling to contemplate.

When people try to stop you speaking about Jesus you should be angry on behalf of those who are deprived the chance to hear the message. But you should feel pity for the people who try to stop you.

Opposed Christians: be encouraged. Opponents of Christ: be warned. But there's a third group of people isn't there? A group that may well include the majority of us here this morning – people who are by no means opposed to Jesus, in fact who describe ourselves as his followers, but who are not being opposed for our faith.

3 Comfortable Christian: be convinced.

Whenever you speak on a part of the New Testament that deals with the subject of Christians being persecuted the most likely question, in 21st century Britain, is "but what about us? We're not being persecuted; does that mean we're not really Christians?"

In answering that question some preachers want to be reassuring. So they tell us that we're not meant to seek persecution (true). They tell us that we live in a country with a long heritage of Christianity being woven into the fabric of society (true). They tell us that we ought to be thankful we aren't very badly persecuted (true). And in telling us all those true things they send us on our way with the *false* impression that there are no difficult and challenging questions we need to ask ourselves.

Other preachers want to be challenging. So they tell us that Christians would be much more persecuted if we made a bigger noise about issues like abortion and euthanasia (true). They tell us that we live in a country where on issues like human sexuality the Christian backdrop to people's morality is disappearing (true). And in telling us those true things they send us on our way with the false impression that the real problem is that we are weak and cowardly and just need to develop some more backbone.

Both types of preacher are dangerously wrong because they haven't properly understood what it is that will make Christians willing to face persecution.

It's in v13. The thing that makes Christians willing to undergo opposition and still keep speaking about Jesus is *receiving the gospel as the word of God*. And the thing that makes Christians avoid opposition is when we take the gospel as merely the word of men.

Why don't I get more opposition from my friends for being a Christian? Let me tell you straight: it's because I'm not very good at talking about Jesus when I think it might be awkward. I'm not very good at talking about who Christ is and why my friends need to believe in him if I have even the vaguest impression that it might in any way risk my friendship.

Now of course that is completely ridiculous. After all if my friends spend eternity in hell because I didn't offer them the good news of Jesus it's not exactly going to enhance my friendships is it? When I think such things it's not because I am concerned for those non-Christians I meet; it's because I want to respect social conventions about awkwardness.

Awkwardness is a big deal in our society, especially amongst the kind of mostly middle class people represented here this morning. We really, really don't like awkwardness. Our rule is 'don't create awkward situations.' Whose rule is that? Is it the word of God or the word of people?

It's the word of people isn't it? And that means our feelings about awkwardness, which say we should not talk about Jesus, should not overrule the word of God, which says we should talk about Jesus.

When I don't talk about Jesus because I fear it might be awkward it's not really because I am a coward; it's because I am allowing a word of people to be more authoritative than a word of God. What needs to change in my life isn't the amount of my courage; it's the conviction of my heart about whose word matters.

That's really important. If you struggle to talk about Jesus you don't need to leave here this morning determined to summon up more courage to go and tell

your friends about Jesus even when it's awkward. That would be a you-centred response.

What we need to do is believe what Paul says; that only the gospel is God's message and that therefore no social convention, no rule of people can overpower God's command to share the gospel with everyone. That is a grace centred response, a response one that allows us to be changed by what God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

If we understand this it will change our approach to telling people about Jesus. And because telling people about Jesus is that one thing that all sorts of people don't want us to do, then we will be more opposed.

Let me give you just three examples. I'm not giving you these examples because I think I have this all sorted out. I need to grow every day in my conviction that the message of God overrules the rules of men.

But this is an area of the Christian life where it's easier to see other people's specific weaknesses than it is to see your own. You guys will be able to see the places where I could speak more about Jesus – we need each other to help us see our blind spots. So, three examples:

First example: in our LifeGroups over this term we have a goal to do something to serve our community and to invite our non-Christian friends to a social event and evangelistic event. The reaction of quite a few of us to that is to say "actually I'd just like to carry on reading the Bible and praying thanks. My friends aren't at that stage. It's too much for them." I admit that was my first reaction too. But then I thought that's actually quite a ridiculous thing to think. What am I saying? That my friends aren't ready to meet my other friends even in a situation where we aren't even going to have a presentation about Jesus. How feeble do I think my friends are?!

And if they are that suspicious of my Christian friends are they really going to break the friendship just because I invite them? Of course they're not - they'll just say no! You see when I'm honest with myself I know my problem is that I have a vague suspicion that inviting them might be a little bit awkward. Get over it Andrew. Believe that the word of God is more authoritative than a made up social idea about awkwardness.

Example 2: Christian teachers often say to me that they wish they could speak more about Jesus in the classroom than they do. This morning, can I ask you, what's stopping you? I have never seen anywhere a written rule that says Christian teachers can't share what they believe about Jesus. It's just an atmosphere created in secular schools where people with power want us to believe we're not allowed to do that. Even if

there is some actual law that says you can't talk about Jesus it's just a human rule. It's not as important as God's command that we should talk about Jesus. What's the worst thing that will happen if you do talk about Jesus? You'll get into trouble with human beings. And Paul says that's actually will be a blessing in your Christian life.

Example 3: Healthcare professionals often say to me that they would like to offer to pray with their patients or invite them to church but that they can't. So this morning, can I ask doctors, nurses, physios, radiologists etc, what's stopping you? There is a specific BMA/Department of Health guideline that says offering to pray for a patient is not a disciplinary issue. And even if in some hospitals or surgeries they don't follow that guidance and you do get into trouble, Paul says that being opposed as a Christian is a blessing in your Christian life. Because the word of God is more authoritative than the word of people.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that Christians all ought to go round breaking rules in their workplaces and social conventions in their families just to get into trouble. There's no need for any Christian to get into trouble for wearing a cross at work; because God doesn't say Christians should wear crosses. There's no need for any Christian to get into trouble for refusing to let a gay couple stay in their B&B because God doesn't say we should exclude sinners from our homes – in fact he says the opposite.

And I'm not having a go at anyone in particular; because we are **all** tempted to obey our culture's conventions on avoiding awkwardness. But, because of that, this morning we all need to be reminded that the gospel Christians believe is the word of God. And that word of God says we should talk about Jesus. And if the consequence of that is that we get into trouble with people, well so be it.

This week if you are being opposed because you are a Christian, take heart. That is a sign that you have accepted the gospel as the non-negotiable, no picking and choosing, take-it-as-it-is word of God.

This week if you meet people who oppose Christians pray for them that they would stop piling up the worst sins in the world and turn to embrace the God who wants to rescue them.

This week if you feel there is an opportunity to speak about Jesus that you are tempted not to take remind yourself that God's word always outranks human rules, remember that mostly when you speak it will go fine, and that even if you suffer for it, that will be a blessing.

Andrew Evans
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