

Enduring Persecution

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:13

What is persecution?

I used to work for Barnabas Fund, helping persecuted Christians. I was once lucky enough to attend a meeting of Christian leaders from persecuted churches to discuss their suffering and plans to help them through it. People whose churches had been bulldozed or burnt down, whose family members had been attacked, who faced government oppression, hefty fines, prison sentences and death threats, whose church members couldn't afford food because discrimination kept them unemployed - all because they were Christian. And what really struck me was that every time I talked with one of these leaders, they would tell me how much they were praying for Christians in Australia, because we are just a young church, and it is such a hard country. They wanted us, the Australian church, to be encouraged in our persecution.

Our persecution? What did they mean? You see, persecution is not just suffering. Suffering is part of the human condition. Everyone suffers. Persecution is a type of suffering forced on people by others to unjustly punish them for who they are or what they believe. So the pain of a broken leg is suffering, but not persecution, unless someone broke your leg unjustly because of who you are or what you believe. When ISIS sprays an N on your door marking your house as Nazarene so they know, "These are the Christians, these are the ones to attack," that is persecution.

Persecution is Good News

Persecution is not unique to Christians. But Christians have a unique attitude to persecution: it is part of the good news of Christianity. I'll repeat that, because it's a bit of a strange statement: persecution is part of the good news of Christianity. Jesus talks about persecution a lot. We heard an example of that in our second reading (Matt 24:4-13). Not only does Jesus promise persecution, but he links it to blessing and salvation! And the apostles said very similar things in their letters: Suffering because you are a Christian is suffering alongside Christ (1 Peter 2:21). Persecution makes us more like Jesus (Philippians 3:10). We share in his sufferings, that we might also share in his glory (Romans 8:17). Persecution spreads the gospel (Colossians 1:24). Do we want to be more like Jesus? Do we want to share in his glory? Do we want the gospel to spread? Then persecution is part of the good news.

On the flight over to that conference of Christian leaders, I recall sitting on the tarmac in Singapore for a long time. The plane was hot and uncomfortable. Finally, over the intercom comes, "This is your captain speaking. Sorry for the delay, and for the broken air-conditioning. We've been having some engine trouble. Unfortunately, the engineers couldn't fix the aircon. But the good news is they did fix the engine, so we are now going to take off." I remember some of the passengers did not think this was good news - if the engineers couldn't fix the aircon, who was to say they properly fixed the engine? The reason passengers didn't think it was good news was because they didn't have faith in the engineers. But it was fine, and we made it safely.

Persecution is a terrible thing - it is a time of painful trial and suffering. But it is also promised to us in the gospel, by Jesus and the apostles. So it is good news - but to see that we must have faith God, the engineer of our persecution.

Since persecution is part of the gospel, it should be no surprise that Paul tells the Thessalonians all about persecution. We read in chapter 1 verse 6 that the Thessalonians "welcomed the message in

the midst of severe suffering". Paul didn't hide the fact that persecution follows the gospel for those who accept it. They were well warned that suffering followed faith. They made an informed decision.

In chapter 3 verse 4 we read not only that Paul told them, but it was something he repeated to them again and again! "In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know." Persecution wasn't an optional extra. It wasn't something that happens to other people. This was a fledgling church he had taught for only three or four weeks. But persecution was on the list of first things you get taught as a fledgling church, as a new Christian. It's part of the gospel message. It was something Paul was modelling to the Thessalonians. Those persecuted church leaders I met see us as a young church - a mere 200 years old, where some of their churches are almost 2000 years old. They see themselves as modelling persecution for us.

The Danger of Persecution

And we need to preach persecution as part of the gospel too! We need to model persecution and our response to persecution to new Christians, and to young Christians. And we need to do it not only because it lets people make an informed decision, but because persecution is dangerous to Christians. You might think, "Well, it's dangerous to some Christians, but not to me, not to my family or my church."

It's easy to think that persecution doesn't really happen in Australia. Maybe we think that if it's not affecting our physical wellbeing - our job, our income, our health - that it's not the real deal. We're not dying, we're not being tortured, so we're not in real danger. But that's a mistake, and here's why - because the most dangerous thing about persecution is not the physical impact it has on our lives, but the spiritual impact. I don't want to downplay the physical suffering of Christians who are persecuted in that way - it is a terrible, scary, painful thing. But our persecuted brothers and sisters, the ones who are so concerned about Australia, know that the biggest danger of persecution is it can tempt people to give up on God.

Remember the parable of the sower: "Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But because they have no root, they last only a short while. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away." This is the number one danger of persecution - that we might become so discouraged that we are tempted to give up on our faith, fall away from God, and go back to our old way of life. That's what kept Paul awake at night thinking about the Thessalonians; they might become discouraged in their faith because of persecution. In chapter 3 verse 5 he says, "I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain." Paul sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith, so that they wouldn't be unsettled by these trials.

Persecution starts at home

When you look at the spiritual danger persecution holds, you start to look at the trials we face for our faith here in Australia a little differently. One fact about persecution is that often it comes from those close to you. And the closer they are to you, the more painful it can be. That was the situation the Thessalonians faced: in Chapter 2 verse 14 Paul said, "You suffered from your own people." It was not primarily outsiders, but their fellow Thessalonians who persecuted them. It was the same for Paul - he always preached to the Jews in a city first, and they came and fought against him in Thessalonica, and chased him to Berea.

The most painful persecution tends to come from your own people. A person in Australia might face rejection, ridicule, even some anger from family and friends. After all, in their eyes you're joining a group linked in the media with child abuse, or standing against same sex marriage. Many people think science has disproved the existence of God, and think believing in God makes you stupid. People who become Christians when the rest of their family hold other views are in for a rough ride. Even if they don't mean to, sometimes non-Christian family will just say hurtful things. I remember my brother once bought a bumper sticker that said, "Jesus loves you - everyone else thinks you're a" <word not appropriate for church>. And he showed it to me with pride, thinking it was a great laugh, not even realising that he was laughing at me. Of course when I pointed that out, he told me, "Aren't Christians allowed to have a sense of humour?"

And that hurts. And our automatic reaction as living things is to shy away from things that hurt. Adam Goodes is an Aboriginal AFL player who has recently taken indefinite leave from the game he loves because people keep booing him. It's not violence, it's not torture. It's booing. This is a big, manly, muscular footy player! This is the power of persecution - it makes people give up! The constant barrage of anti-Christian sentiment we face could cause anyone to feel bad, to question their faith, to ask "What if I'm wrong?", to say, "This is too hard."

Fighting Discouragement with Faith

Persecution's biggest danger is that a Christian gets discouraged, and tempted to just give up. That's why Paul's number one concern for the Thessalonian church was to send Timothy to, "to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials." The weapon God gives us to fight discouragement of our faith is encouragement in our faith. And that encouragement comes from one another. We need to carry one another's burdens, as fellow Christians. Discouragement is a burden that we must share together, without judgement, because this persecution is a promised part of the gospel, and is a serious danger. Satan will try to stop us, because encouragement works to strengthen people's faith. Paul says in Chapter 2 verse 18, "For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way."

How do we encourage one another in faith? Often our first port of call is to tell people, "Read the Bible more, learn more about God, understand your beliefs more deeply." Those are all good things. But that is just one part of encouragement in faith. There's an idea that education can cure all the ills of the world. It's not a Christian idea. It's a modern idea, a secular idea. And it's convincing because learning is good! And learning about God is probably the best learning of all. But learning is just a part of growth. Faith is bigger than knowledge. The gospel is a pretty neat little message. It can be recorded into a small pamphlet. Little kids can grasp it. In Chapter 3 verse 8, Paul considered the Thessalonians to be standing firm in the Lord: not because of their great knowledge - they didn't even know what happens to Christians when they die - but because they were strong in their faith in God and in Jesus Christ.

When I was on that plane with the broken engine, I didn't trust the engineers to fix it because I know anything about engines. I trusted them because they are engineers! Handing one of my fellow passengers the schematics of an aircraft engine may not calm their nerves - seeing how complicated it is might make them feel worse! But assuring them, "Hey, those guys are professionals. They know what they're doing," that's encouraging their faith in the engineers.

Strong Faith is a Strong Encouragement

And that's what we are called to do for those who are struggling with persecution - to encourage their faith in God. The biggest encouragement to a believer who is struggling with the

discouragement of persecution is to share the strength of your own faith. A strong faith is a visible faith. Paul says to the Thessalonians in chapter 1 verse 3, "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith." A life of faith produces work. If we want to encourage Christians who are facing persecution, who are disheartened and hard pressed, we need to be living lives of faith, with works produced by faith. That is why Paul sent Timothy to the Thessalonians: chapter 3 verse 2, because Timothy "is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ." Timothy's life of work produced by faith will buoy up and encourage the Thessalonians.

If you want to be an encouragement to those who are suffering for bearing the name of Christ, then you need to be strong in your faith. Your trust in God needs to be visible in how you live your life. Living by faith is not saying, "I trust God to help my suffering brothers and sisters in Christ, so I don't need to do anything myself." Living by faith is saying, "I trust God to give me everything I need, so I can give my time, energy and money to helping my brothers and sisters who are in need."

Persecution is good news because it also strengthens our faith. It turns out that the Thessalonians are so strong in their faith in Jesus that when Timothy brings back a positive report of how the young church is doing in the face of trials and persecution, Paul writes to them in chapter 3 verse 7, "in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith." Paul actually gets encouraged in the midst of his persecution by the Thessalonians and their faith! And in the same way, as we seek to encourage those who are facing persecution, we too will be encouraged by their faith in enduring persecution.

Christians in Syria, in a town called Kobane that was recently taken by ISIS, sent out this message, "Don't worry about us, even if they were to cut our heads off ten times we would still say that Jesus is Lord!" They send that message out to the church, to us, because they assume our biggest fear is that they might be tempted to fall away, and they want to encourage us that they are standing firm with Jesus. They face death, and they want to encourage us!

Do you want to grow in your faith? Then come alongside those who are persecuted. Not only will you encourage their faith, but as they endure, so too will your faith be encouraged. When our response to persecution is to put God first, it can't help but be an encouragement to others, because our faith is clearly shown!

Persecution is not just a danger Christians face in foreign lands. It is a part of the gospel. All Christians face discouragement and temptation to fall away wherever their lives rub up against the outside world. We need to understand that and equip new and young Christians with that knowledge. It is only by faith that we can stand firm and encourage others to stand firm. We need to live lives of faith, not just for ourselves, but for young Christians, new Christians, and those facing harsh trials. By standing with them in faith, we encourage them, and are likewise encouraged.