



## Sermon Transcript

### May 19, 2019

## When Jesus Turns Your Life Around

### Embrace Suffering

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 19, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

## Sermon Text

### 1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

<sup>2:13</sup> And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. <sup>14</sup> For you, brothers, became imitators of the church of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, <sup>15</sup> who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind <sup>16</sup> by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last.

<sup>17</sup> But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, <sup>18</sup> because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. <sup>19</sup> For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? <sup>20</sup> For you are our glory and joy. <sup>3:1</sup> Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, <sup>2</sup> and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> that no one be moved by these afflictions.

For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.

## Introduction

Early in my time here at WEFC, I had the privilege of going on a mission trip with a group of people from the church. We went to Thailand. We were there for two weeks and each week I was assigned to teach and encourage a group of pastors. The highlight for me was the first week when we were at the northern border city of Mae Sai. This city was on the border with Burma and everyday we received about fifteen Burmese pastors who crossed the border checkpoint to attend this training. These men were some of the most humble and gracious people I ever met.

As I got to know them, I discovered that their ministry context was very different than my ministry context. Burma—also known as Myanmar—has long been a place where Christians are persecuted, whether by the government or by their Buddhist neighbors. I also discovered that these pastors worked ten hour days in the fields to make ends meet. On top of this, they were pastoring a group of people. As I got to know the complexity of their stories, their smiles became all the more brighter to me.

I didn't choose what to teach them. Rather, I was assigned what to teach them. I was part of a string of several pastors who would come to the region over a period of time to give them some training. My assignment was to teach them some basic Christian living principles. One of the principles I was assigned to teach was on giving and sacrificial giving. As I got to know their stories, I felt completely inadequate to teach them about how “to give.” If anything, I felt that the tables should have been turned and I had a lot to learn from them in the matter of giving and sacrificial living. Giving and sacrifice was the name of the game if you were a follower of Jesus living in Burma.

I feel the same sense of inadequacy when addressing the passage we are looking at this morning. The context and the experience of this passage can feel somewhat foreign to our experience as Christians in this American context. Clearly, the Thessalonian Christians are suffering—they are facing persecution at the hands of their own countrymen because of their faith in Jesus. The opposition these young Christians were facing was more than just a condescending roll of the eyes, or a behind the back snickering at such foolish faith or a marginalizing of a group of people within the community. It was much more threatening than that. We know from Acts 17 some of them had already experienced what it was like for a mob to overtake them and bring them before the magistrates, accusing them of treason against Caesar and the government of Rome. It was intense and you get the impression from what Paul is saying that their very lives felt threatened.

I was reminded this week of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna who died in A.D. 155. At one point, he too was hauled before the magistrates and ordered to recant of his faith in Christ. Famously, he stood his ground and said, “Eighty and six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”<sup>1</sup> When they took him to be burnt at the stake, as was typical, they went to nail his hands to the stake so that he would not try to flee when the flames grew hot around him. He said to them, “Let me be as I am. He that granted me to endure the fire will grant me also to remain at the pyre unmoved without being secured by nails.”<sup>2</sup> And when they watched him die, they marveled at the difference between the way believers and unbelievers die. Such experiences seem foreign to our experience of living out our faith.

But I don’t think it is just the experience of persecution that seems foreign to us this morning. I also think it is the message of this passage that seems foreign to us in our American version of Christianity. If I had to summarize Paul’s message in this passage, I would say Paul is calling Christians to embrace a lifestyle of suffering and sacrifice. He says in 1 Thessalonians 3:3 that these afflictions the Thessalonians were experiencing were what they were destined for as followers of Christ. And furthermore, he reminds them in verse 4 that when he was with them that he kept telling them that as followers of Jesus they were to suffer this kind of affliction. This is the Christian norm.

This too, tends to go counter to the kind of Christian message we preach in this Western culture. We tend to offer a gospel that promises, “if you come to faith in Jesus, life is going to go better for you.” How many times do we hear testimonies about how Jesus has made our life better or easier? Mark Sayers captures the mindset of our cultural Christianity when he says, “The belief is that if we do the stuff of Christianity—read our Bibles, help the poor, worship passionately, move the sound equipment without groaning—we will get a slice of the awesome Christian life.”<sup>3</sup> John Piper asks a good question—someone has to ask it, “Does life go better with Christ?” He responds by saying, “This is an utterly crucial question for the Christian church, especially in prosperous, comfortable lands like America and Western Europe . . . It seems that most Christians in the prosperous West describe the benefits of Christianity in terms that would make it a good life.”<sup>4</sup> It doesn’t seem to be the message of Paul. So even our message at times can seem out of step with what we read in our passage this morning.

So I come to this passage this morning out of the context of our culture and find myself wrestling with what I am reading against what I am experiencing. And I find myself asking the question, “Is it true?” If we are going to follow Jesus are we really being asked to embrace a life of suffering and sacrifice and loss? If so, how does that impact how I

live out my faith? I would suggest to you, that this is one of the ways Jesus turns your life around. He turns it from pursuing a life of comfort to pursuing a life of sacrifice. I want you to consider three things Paul has to say about embracing a life of suffering.

### **Suffering is Evidence of Genuine Faith**

The first thing Paul tells us about embracing a life of suffering as a follower of Christ is that it gives evidence that faith is genuine. He begins in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 by thanking God for their response to his brief ministry among them. Not only did they hear the word of God proclaimed by Paul, but he says they received it and accepted it for what it was, *“not as the word of men but as it really is, the word of God.”* We know from Acts 17 that when he first came to them at the synagogue those three Sabbaths that *“he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’”* The message they heard, received and accepted was the message that Jesus Christ is the Savior and the Lord. Repent of your sin and believe.

As Paul writes this letter, how does he know that these people really accepted this message to be true? It wasn't because of their faithful attendance at the synagogue that convinced him that they were truly embracing what he had to say. Nor, was it because every now and then someone said “Amen!” to what he had to say. Instead, the “proof in the pudding” was that they imitated their Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem by standing in solidarity with them: namely, they too embraced suffering under the hands of their countrymen as did their Jewish brothers and sisters who also turned to faith in Jesus. The progression of thought goes like this: Paul knows that the word of God is at work in the Thessalonians because they imitated the church in Judea in that they too suffered for their faith at the hands of their countrymen. See the progression starting at the end of verse 13. *“ . . . the word of God, which is at work in you believers. For you, brothers, became imitators of the church of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews.”* This is what gives Paul reason to give thanks and it gives him confidence that their faith is truly genuine. They embraced a life of suffering for aligning themselves with Jesus.

Where does such boldness come from? It is rooted in a deep gospel conviction. What is that deep gospel conviction? It is the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord. The focus of the gospel is not that God has a wonderful plan for your life. Rather, the focus of the gospel is the proclamation that Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord. Jesus is the focus of the gospel. It was this very confession that put the believers in Thessalonica at odds with

their culture. On one hand, Emperor worship, the worship of Caesar as Lord, automatically put these early Christians in a difficult spot. Their refusal to bow down to Caesar caused them to be viewed as political subversives and a threat to the political unity of the Roman Empire. In fact, when you go back to Acts 17 and when a group of these early believers were rounded up and brought before the magistrates, they accused them in Acts 17:7 saying, *“they are acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”*

In addition to that, the early Christians were considered to be atheists because they didn’t worship the pantheon of gods. We discover in our passage that Paul is in Athens when he sends Timothy to the Thessalonians. Athens is the place where Paul encounters all idols and gods that are worshiped. Do you remember how he stumbles upon a statute “to the unknown God.” Paul took this as an opportunity to tell them about the God who was unknown to them—the one created all things. Paul concluded his talk by saying that this God—the God—is going to judge the world by the man whom he appointed and he gave evidence to this by raising him from the dead. As soon as he mentioned the resurrection it says many mocked him, though some wanted to learn more. There was a Greek philosopher by the name of Celsus—A.D. 170—who said of the Christians that they insist on the worship of Jesus as God’s son. If only they would just worship God as father—a generic god—and not insist on worshiping this man they claim has risen from the dead—“the author of their sedition”<sup>5</sup>—then they would fit in a little better. But that is the problem. We don’t worship a generic “god.” We don’t pray to a generic “god.” We pray in the name of Jesus!

And that is where we still feel the rub in our culture. Joe Stowell recounts a time when he attended the Chicago Leadership Prayer Breakfast when he was president of Moody Bible Institute. Having attended these breakfasts for about fifteen years, he could remember how the name of Jesus was freely used in the midst of this fairly diverse religious gathering. But at this particular gathering the name of Jesus was deliberately excluded because the emphasis was on diversity and the exclusive nature of Jesus didn’t necessarily fit with the theme of the morning. The keynote speaker implored these religious leaders from a diverse background to embrace a generic god and to let go of any exclusive claim to truth. He quoted the poet Carl Sandburg, who reportedly said, “The worst word in the English language is ‘exclusive.’”<sup>6</sup> The speaker’s intention was clear—no one should claim an exclusive corner on how to get to God. Stowell was sitting there wondering what the reaction will be at the end of the speech. When the speaker was finished, immediately the crowd stood with applause. But Stowell and his colleagues remained seated. He said, “I felt unsettlingly conspicuous. But as

embarrassing as it was, I didn't stand . . . At that breakfast I made a decision. I committed myself to stick up for Jesus whenever and wherever . . . Regardless. Though I knew that this decision might come at a cost."<sup>7</sup>

Richard Wurmbrand spent 14 years in a Romanian prison because of his faith in Jesus. He liked to tell the story of a monk who lived a life of extreme sacrifice. This particular monk was asked by a reporter, "What if you were to realize at the end of your life that atheism is true—that there is no God? Tell me, what if that were true?" The monk replied that "Holiness, silence, and sacrifice are beautiful in themselves, even without promise of reward. I still will have used my life well."<sup>8</sup> At first glance, that sounds rather noble. But it doesn't square with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. He says that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, "*we are of all people most to be pitied.*" But the opposite is true as well. If Jesus rose from the dead—and we confess that to be true—then he is worthy of us living a life that only the resurrection can explain. It is a life that says, "*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*" It is this confession that gives evidence to genuine faith.

### **Suffering Advances the Gospel**

The second thing I want to point out about suffering and sacrifice is that God often uses suffering to advance the gospel. In the second part of our passage we see Paul telling the Thessalonians that he tried over and over again to revisit them. If you recall, Paul's stay with them was very brief, at best a few months. His presence in Thessalonica caused quite a stir and so Paul was forced to leave rather quickly. That is what he means in 1 Thessalonians 2:17 when he says, "*But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart.*" In other words, "we were forced to leave you and while we can't be with you in person, you are in constantly in our hearts." And of course, Paul is concerned for this church as they face the hardship of living out their faith in the midst of opposition. And so, again and again he tried to get to them, but "*Satan hindered us*" he says. In other words, it was too risky. So we learn in 1 Thessalonians 3:1 that Paul sent Timothy to them while he remained in Athens. And Timothy's assignment was to encourage them, "*that no one be moved by these afflictions.*" Timothy was sent to encourage them.

When you read this passage, you can't help but see the very real spiritual battle taking place—a battle often hidden from our eyes, but very real. When we pull back the curtains on this spiritual battle it may seem like Satan has the upper hand. Paul says in verse 13 that this persecution is *hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they*

*might be saved.*” Those are real consequences. It is because of the work spiritual forces that Paul is also hindered from coming in person to encourage this church. It is good for us to be reminded that our battle is not against flesh and blood—but there is a very real spiritual battle taking place all around us. But Jesus said that the “*gates of hell will not prevail.*” What at times may seem like spiritual defeat, what history has told us, God has used to actually advance the gospel.

Don’t miss the signs of hope in this passage. Conflict and persecution was the context of how this church in Thessalonica got started. Paul says of them in 1 Thessalonians 1:6 that “*they received the word in much affliction.*” So the irony of it all is that this *affliction* did not keep the gospel from advancing in their lives. In fact, Paul says of them in our passage this morning that they are his “*glory and joy.*” In other words, when he stands before God some day, they will stand next to him and he will say of his suffering—it was worth it all!

We are far enough along in church history where we can look back and see time and time again where faithful Christians have endured in the midst of much persecution and God has birthed something that only God could do. Paul says something interesting about suffering in Colossians 1:24. He says that he rejoices in his sufferings because “*he is filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.*” It makes you ask—what could possibly be lacking in Christ’s afflictions? Wasn’t the cross—the affliction of Christ—“all—sufficient”? Paul is not claiming that he is adding anything to the suffering of Christ. Rather, if the cross—the suffering of Jesus for us—is the greatest demonstration of God’s love for us, when we suffer for the sake of Christ, we are able to give others a visible and tangible expression of God’s love for them. In other words, we become a visible demonstration of God’s love that was ultimately expressed at the cross. A Romanian Pastor, Josef Tson put it this way: “I am an extension of Jesus Christ. When I was beaten in Romania, He suffered in my body. It is not my suffering: I only had the honor to share his suffering.”<sup>9</sup> And over time, our willingness to suffer demonstrates the love of God and it causes the gospel to advance.

We will close this morning with a song and the words go like this, “we will overcome, by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony.” That is taken right out of Revelation 12:11. Listen to the whole verse: “*They have conquered Satan by the blood of the Lamb [the work of Jesus on the cross] and by the word of their testimony [our proclamation of the gospel that Jesus is Lord], for they loved not their lives even unto death.*” In other words, the gospel of Jesus triumphs by our suffering. And so we embrace whatever suffering we face, knowing that God is at work in it.



## Suffering is our Calling

And so Paul concludes his words of instruction and encouragement in our passage by reminding them that suffering is our calling as followers of Christ. He says in verses 3-4, *“For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 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.”* John Piper said, “I have never heard anyone say, ‘The really deep lessons of life have come through times of ease and comfort.’ But I have heard strong saints say, ‘Every significant advance I have ever made in grasping the depths of God’s love and growing deep with Him has come through suffering.’”<sup>10</sup> Or consider what Samuel Rutherford said, “when I was cast into the cellars of affliction, I remembered that the great King always kept his wine there.”<sup>11</sup> Or the words of Spurgeon, “they who dive into the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls.”<sup>12</sup>

It all starts with a mindset. 2 Corinthians 2:14 says, *“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.”* That sure sounds inviting and victorious—*triumphal procession*. It sounds like a championship parade that the city of Boston has become way too accustomed to!! But in this Roman setting, that is not the scene at all. A Triumphal Procession was when a Roman General or Caesar himself, returned from defeating their enemy, they would pillage the homes of their enemies and enslave their people. And so the people walking in the parade were slaves—often former rulers and generals and nobles. At the end of the parade a representative would be chosen from among the procession and that chosen person would be sacrificed as an offering to the gods and the rest would become slaves to Rome.

That completely changes the picture of what it means for us to be part of this *“triumphal procession.”* Paraded by the Romans, Jesus was taken to the cross and sacrificed. But in this upside down kingdom, his sacrifice brings a different kind of kingdom. It brings about a people—you and me—who walk behind Christ as slaves to Christ. It is a selfless path to walk and it is incomprehensible to this world—and it binds us to one another. Paul uses the image of this *triumphal entry* again in 1 Corinthians 4:9. This time, it captures clearly what is our calling: *“God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as human beings.”* Knowing this, helps us to simply take the posture of a servant. Piper says, “There is no true Christianity without cross-bearing and a daily dying—which sounds very muck like Paul’s ‘I die daily.’”<sup>12</sup> Jesus says, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom*

*of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

## **Conclusion**

So what do we take from this message this morning? Perhaps our experience and even our approach to Christian faith doesn't always align with what we find in this passage. While we may feel some pressure to go soft with our confession of Jesus, we don't face the kind of persecution some face around the world. And perhaps even the way we approach our faith has more to do with adding comfort to our lives than it does sacrifice and suffering. So what do we do?

I think we ask this question of ourselves. What is it about my life—the way I live out my faith—can only be explained by the resurrection of Christ?

For starters, you come here Sunday after Sunday to worship Jesus. Why would we do this if we didn't believe that Jesus rose from the dead? But what other sacrifices do you make and what kinds of “loss” do you embrace because Jesus rose from the dead? Who do you sacrifice time to serve? How do you use your home to serve others and how do you come alongside the forgotten? What comforts do you say “no” to so that you can better serve God? Will we ever be called to make the ultimate sacrifice? I am not sure. But if I am called to suffer for Christ, I want to think I will follow the long line of those who have come before me and do so. But it begins by daily exercising the muscle of sacrifice. It is taking the daily posture of a servant and serving God and others throughout the day.

What is it about the way I live my life that can only be explained by the resurrection of Jesus? In this we embrace suffering.

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- <sup>1</sup>Quoted in “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) 10.
- <sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 11
- <sup>3</sup>Mark Sayers *Disappearing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2016) 82
- <sup>4</sup>John Piper *Desiring God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011) Kindle Reader: Location 4366
- <sup>5</sup>Robert Wilken *The Christians as Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 105
- <sup>6</sup>Joseph M. Stowell *The Trouble With Jesus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2003) 16
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 23
- <sup>8</sup>Piper, Kindle Reader Location 4366
- <sup>9</sup>Josef Tson “A Theology of Martyrdom,” an undated booklet of the Romanian Missionary Society, 1415 Hill Avenue, Wheaton, IL 60187, p. 4
- <sup>10</sup>Piper, Kindle Reader Location 4569
- <sup>11</sup>*Letters of Samuel Rutherford* quoted in Piper—Kindle Reader Location 4569
- <sup>12</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon “The Golden Key of Prayer” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Banner of Truth) (Sermon #619), March 12, 1865

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS

### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. If you could go on a cross-country road trip with a famous person, who would it be and why?
2. Use this time to “check-in” with each other. What emotions are you most feeling and why? Sad—Angry—Scared—Happy—Excited—Tender (This is best done in groups of 2-3) *Use this as an opportunity to pray for each other.*
3. Share one thought or one question you had about the sermon?

### Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16. What is the sign that God’s word is at work in us? Do you think we are more caught up with a life of comfort or a life of sacrifice? How does that impact the way we approach our faith?
5. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:3. What do you learn about the power of encouragement from this passage? What do you learn in this passage about the way God uses suffering (see also Colossians 1:24).
6. Read 1 Thessalonians 3:3-5; 2 Corinthians 2:14; 1 Corinthians 4:9. What do you learn about yourself—as a follower of Jesus—after reading these passages? How does that help you move from a life of comfort to a life of sacrifice?
7. Read 1 Corinthians 1:19. Identify ways we can live that only the resurrection of Jesus can explain.

### Taking It Home

8. Pray for the persecuted church. See Voice of the Martyrs [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com)
9. What is one way you can “embrace suffering” this coming week?