

Suffering for the Lord's Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] the passage today is from two thessalonians chapter one verses one to twelve paul sylvanus and timothy to the church of the thessalonians in god our father and the lord jesus christ grace to you and peace from god our father and the lord jesus christ we ought always to give thanks to god for you brothers as is right because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of everyone for you of you for one another is increasing therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of god for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring this is evidence of the righteous judgment of god that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of god for which you are also suffering since indeed god considers it just to repay with affliction all those who afflict you and to grant relief to those who are afflicted as well as to us when the lord jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire inflicting vengeance on those who do not know god and on those who do not obey the gospel of lord jesus they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the lord and from the glory of his might when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at among all who have believed because our testimony to you was believed to this end we always pray for you that our god may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power so that the name of our god our lord jesus may be glorified in you and you in him according to the grace of our god and the lord jesus christ thank you elspeth for reading i'm going to lead us in a prayer as we begin why don't we bow our heads and we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the lord are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another father we pray that this morning you would transform us from one degree to another in the image and face of our lord jesus christ please would you make him altogether lovely to us beautiful to us and would we go away wanting to praise honor and live like him more amen what would it look like for grace church dulwich to thrive and not just survive but thrive now there might be a bunch of ways that you might answer that question might be if we were filled to the rafters and suddenly we were full of lots and lots of very clever very beautiful people perhaps that would be what it would look like for us to thrive maybe it'd be a particular type of music or sacramental precision perhaps that's what it would look like for us to thrive or perhaps maybe for us more likely some nice robust orthodox preaching with some punchy penetrating points that obviously alliterates do you see what i did there i lit never mind but what would it actually look like for us to not just survive but thrive but that question of course it particularly bites doesn't it when we're confronted with suffering one trainer of preachers once said to another group of young preachers who were somewhat headstrong that always prepare your sermons as though at least five people in the room are quietly desperate for a word of encouragement very good advice and if you ask them perhaps and that might be you this morning thrive i'm just trying to keep my head above water why are you talking to me about thriving you might be rolling your eyes or thinking maybe this sermon isn't for me or this is somewhat of a cruel joke and that's how the thessalonian church very well might have been feeling the thessalonian church was one of the first churches that paul planted

and within a very short time of paul arriving a murderous mob drove him out under threat of killing him so that he had to flee and he was and he had to leave this young and fledgling church in the hands of wolves we get a sense of that and we probably got a sense of that in our reading as elspeth wonderfully read to us chapter 2 verse 4 therefore we are chapter 1 sorry verse 4 therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of god for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring verse 5 this is evidence of the righteous judgment of god that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of god for which you are also suffering as in suffering is writ large all over these verses and it's not just suffering in terms of blunt persecution but there is something altogether more pernicious going on chapter 2 verse 1 now concerning the coming of our lord jesus christ and our being gathered together to him we ask you brothers not to be too quickly shaken in mind or alarmed either by a spirit or a spoken word or a letter seeming to be from us to the effect that the day of the lord has come in other words not only are they receiving persecution but there are also people pretending to be paul telling them that the lord jesus christ has already been and gone that your resurrection hope oh you were hoping for jesus to take you to heaven he's gone and so the thessalonians are in a position where they might well be feeling as though paul has abandoned them their people have abandoned them and it seems maybe that even their god has abandoned them so we could well imagine can't we the desolation and the temptation to give up and if a young management consultant christian yuppie came up to them and said now i don't what would it mean for you to thrive as a church they might look at him like he is mad thrive thrive we just want to survive thrive we just want to survive well two thessalonians and as i well encourage you to read this book in your quiet times it will take you about 15 minutes to read all three chapters there are details in it which don't appear anywhere else in the new testament some complicated details and if you're hoping that we're going to kind of get all the answers as we go through these series then i will just direct you to andy and he'll be able to give you all the answers because i don't know but the one thing that we mustn't ever lose sight of is that the big thrust in every single chapter of this book the overall thrust from paul every single time is reassurance so when in doubt reassurance and that will be the application for us in each chapter and the overall application of this book paul wants to reassure and so in our chapter he gives two shocks two shocks to reassure the thessalonian christians two shocks to reassure them and the points are on the back of your handout if you want to follow along shock number one verses three and four the thessalonian church is not just is not surviving but thriving the thessalonian church is not surviving but thriving verse three to four you can well imagine can't you verse one the trepidation paul sylvanus and timothy and immediately they're probably thinking to themselves is this a real letter from paul am i about to be told off again am i about to be told that god has abandoned us again but if you flick to the end of the letter chapter 3 verse 17 there is a wonderful reassurance at the end of the letter 3 verse 17 i paul write this greeting with my own hand this is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine it is the way i write

in other words paul is making sure that they understand he's signing it in other words like a royal seal this is from me this is the real deal the real McCoy i suppose you could say and when they read those first two verses sorry the first two verses of the main body of the letter verse three and verse four can we imagine the relief no rebuke from paul that they've missed the coming of the lord or they're doing something wrong no rebuke at all but rather boasting have a look down with me at verse three and verse four we that is paul are always to give thanks to god for you brothers as is right because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of god for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring can you imagine the relief paul thanks god for them what a shock they're not just floundering not even surviving no they are thriving and let's follow the logic of verse three and verse four paul gives thanks to god verse three because your faith is growing abundantly and your love for one another is increasing that's strange isn't it i don't know if you've ever received a thank you letter that was then addressed to somebody else that would be bizarre wouldn't it you give somebody a gift and they write back saying i'm so grateful to your sister for the gift that you gave me that's quite strange but do we see that that's how the logic of this is working paul thanks god for their steadfastness it isn't gratitude to them but to god why well what does that mean about god's presence it means god is there god has been working in them and still is working in them in other words they've not been abandoned at the end of the world has not come and they've been left no god has always been there but it gets better not only are they thanking god for them but verse four therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of god for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring they boast about them in other words not only has god not abandoned you but paul is literally going around all the churches that he's planted being like have you heard about the thessalonians they are the real deal god is working in them and so not only is the thessalonian church not been abandoned they are delighted in and we might be thinking well why and it is because if we notice in the detail that not only are they persevering through suffering but they are loving one another through it verse three and the love of every one of you has for one another is increasing they are loving one another through suffering that is why they are thriving not just surviving loving one another through suffering now we might pause for a second and think well that that doesn't sound that impressive they're just loving one another through suffering why does that lead to paul boasting and what would it take to make an apostle boast about us here at grace church dullage well for them it seems love through suffering why why is that what is paul thinks is so unbelievably impressive so unbelievably impressive that he would boast in them well two reasons first is to see that it is the pattern of the christian life if you flick back to one thessalonians chapter two one and two thessalonians are written in very close order so one thessalonians is a very useful place if you want to understand more of the context one thessalonians

chapter two starting at verse 13 and we also thank god constantly for this there's that note of thanks to god again 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 a work in believers for you brothers became imitators of the churches 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 who killed both the lord jesus and the prophets and drove us out and displeased god and opposed all mankind do we see what paul is saying paul is saying that christianity 101 has always been and always will be love through suffering what characterized the prophet's life serving god and suffering for it what characterized paul's ministry serving god and suffering for it what characterized the lord jesus christ serving god and loving of others and suffering through it and what characterizes the thessalonians love to one another serving god and suffering for it in other words christians suffer when they receive the word of god and they will always do so why because that is the christian pattern it has always been the christian pattern it is the authenticating story now again we still might be somewhat nonplussed i could well imagine us thinking well is that really what characterizes the christian experience on a fundamental level should we really be that impressed boasting that we're able to love through suffering and it's worth isn't it just pausing for a second to compare perhaps the christian story on that front to the secular one

Nietzsche in his famous letter describing the madman said that the wonderful humanistic phrase as it was coined that god is dead and we had killed him we've probably all heard this phrase but did we know that the story goes on that the madman as he's called he rushes into the town square and he starts shouting to all the non-believers and the madman who has declared the death of god says we are god is dead and we have killed him and we do not have enough water to wash away the blood we've untethered ourselves from the sun the sky has fallen away and now we are only falling we must become worthy of the fact that we have killed god because if we don't the next century will be the bloodiest in human history his point being in other words in a very flowery way of saying it it's quite flowery isn't it but anyway is that because we have killed god we have removed the thing that all of society was tethered to we've removed the foundation in other words and if we don't find something else if we don't find something better well then we will have the bloodiest century in human history and the very next century lo and behold the 20th century in many ways you could characterize it as the bloodiest of all centuries in human history perhaps closer to home

[15 : 15] I was recently reading Richard Dawkins A River Out of Eden I thought with the name perhaps that he'd finally come to faith but I was wrong and Dawkins said this about the world this is perhaps the atheistic story summarized in a universe of electrons and selfish genes blind physical forces and genetic replication some people are going to get hurt other people are going to get lucky and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it nor any justice the universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design no purpose no evil no good nothing but pitiless indifference DNA neither cares nor knows DNA just is and we dance to its music what a beautiful story that we are mechanistic machines dancing to our DNA and then we compare that story to the story that Paul has just been saying that he is boasting in because if we pause for a second love through suffering what was it that the Lord Jesus Christ was doing on the night that he was betrayed and a while ago we went through John in the upper room discourse and we would have seen the Lord Jesus Christ remove his outer layer kneel down in the muck and clean the filth off his disciples feet including the man who was going to betray him we would have seen the Lord Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane saying Lord please

I don't want to be crucified but not my will but yours be done love through suffering and we would have heard as the Lord Jesus Christ lay on his back on the wood of the cross and the nails were driven into his hands and his feet the Lord Jesus saying forgive them they don't know what they're doing and we would have heard the Lord Jesus as he was raised up on the cross and the thief next to him turned and said please give me forgiveness the Lord Jesus saying today you will be with me in paradise love through suffering in other words at every single stage the Lord Jesus Christ the one man who never deserved to die never deserved to experience judgment in fact the one man who was eternal gave up his rights and loved through suffering and so when Paul comes across a little house church that is buffeted on every side persecuted from without deceived from within who are loving one another he says there is God there is God and of course when we place those two stories next to each other we see of course that the Lord Jesus Christ story love through suffering is far more beautiful and far more powerful so that's the first reassurance they are not just surviving because they are loving one another just like the Lord Jesus they're thriving not just surviving but thriving the second reassurance is that Jesus will return and vindicate you and this is in verses 5 to 12

Jesus will return and vindicate you it's worth saying of course that suffering in and of itself is not something good we're not masochistic as Christians in other words we don't go out of our way to seek suffering towards its own end but rather suffering leads somewhere just as Christ suffered and died led to resurrection in glory so too the saints suffer and then will reign with him verse 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at among all who have believed because our testimony to you was believed and of course if this suffering that the Thessalonians are experiencing didn't have an end in view well there'll be no reason to persevere no reason to love one another through it there is a glorious end in view the first thing that Paul reminds them of is God's character have a look down with me at verse 5 this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are also suffering since indeed

God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you in other words Paul is making clear and reminding them of God's character that God is just that God fully intends one day at the end of history all of mankind no exception to repay evil for evil and faithfulness for faithfulness at the coming of Christ and it will be Christ the same Christ who said father forgive them they know not what they are doing it is the same Christ who will return to enact that judgment have a look down with me again from verse 6 since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints and to be marvelled at among all who have believed because our testimony to you was believed and notice the unambiguous binary in these verses eternity has two roads and only two and it is the Lord Jesus Christ who sends people down each one of them some verse 9 will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and some verse 7 will be granted relief to those who were afflicted and that is why Paul then comes in verse 11 and 12 to say that because this future is certain you can persevere because this future is certain you can persevere verse 11 and 12 the verses we had read in our prayers to this end we always pray for you that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him according to the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ in other words because the Christian has certainty over the future well then they are able to persevere through suffering now the reason we have certainty which means that we can love one another despite our suffering

Tim Keller spoke beautifully and poignantly about this future at his brother's funeral his brother Billy died of HIV and was converted on his deathbed and Tim Keller said this about the certain future that was awaiting his brother dead is when we don't know God as father but only as boss or vague influence Billy was dead but now he's alive he took the robe and when you take the robe then what happens to death we laugh at death you see Christians don't fall asleep when they die that's when they finally wake up Billy hasn't gone to the cold and dark he's gone into the warmth and life where he perceives God in all five senses or maybe even a thousand or a million senses we can hardly fathom in the cold and dark of this fallen world so those behind left behind don't wish Billy to come back they ask God to prepare them to be with him and our true elder brother we get ready to greet daybreak when it will be a bright sunny morning forever and that is the relief the utter relief that Paul is talking about that the Thessalonians will one day embrace or in the words of the poet

[23 : 28] George Herbert in the death and resurrection of Jesus death is no longer an executioner he is just a gardener and so do you see because Christians have the certainty that they will follow the same path as the Lord Jesus that they will go from death to eternal life that they will be vindicated well then they are freed up they are freed up to love one another if we know our fairy tales at all we know that the hero is the one that beats the greatest enemy Samwise Gamgee helping Frodo with the ring that's not a nerdy reference if we haven't read Lord of the Rings then I'm afraid all hope is lost Prince Charming and the dragon and Jesus Christ and the sting of death Jesus has overcome death and he will return one day to bring history to a close and so the great resounding note of Thessalonians is that you can continue persevering through suffering loving one another because Christ has loved you he will end history and the end of history has two roads one to life and one to death but what a life he offers the kind of life that the love of the Thessalonians for one another is a foretaste of would we not like that life for ourselves if we are not currently his as we conclude the Thessalonian church have had a hard time with it

I think it's fair to say a very hard time with it but Paul presents them with two ironclad reassurances the first is that their suffering does not mean that they've been abandoned or that they're doing something wrong but rather they're thriving they are showing the love of the Lord Jesus Christ to one another that is a glorious thing something worth boasting in second reassurance is that Christ is Lord of history and he will return and grant them relief and vindication that the pattern is not just suffering and then nothing the pattern is suffering resurrection tomb life cross ascension defeat victory and that is the Christian pattern and the Thessalonians are on the cusp of that victory they can keep going because one day darkness will give way to light because with Christ it always does and for us therefore we began thinking about what makes a thriving church and here we see that the answer quite simply is loving one another through suffering loving one another through suffering which is liberating two applications liberating and aspirational it is liberating because we don't have to be the smartest cookies in the cookie jar we don't have to have the biggest congregation in south east London we don't have to have the most excellent music in the world we don't have to have the most amazing building and sacramental practices all we have to do is love an infinitesimally small percentage of the amount that Jesus has loved us

Jesus will never ask us to do anything that he himself has not done and infinitely more all we have to do is love one another because we have been loved first second and finally application is aspirational my prayer for us as a church family from two Thessalonians is that Grace Church Dulwich would love each other so much and that other churches would talk about us in that way just like they are about the Thessalonian church and that our love would be boasted about did you hear about Grace Church Dulwich how much they love one another despite suffering and if we're honest it's not difficult to love the people in this room when we ourselves have been loved with a love that is so great that it breaks down all racial boundaries all class boundaries and a love that speaks of a God who loved us so much that he has our name scarred into his hands and sides why don't I pray for us as we close

Father we thank you so much for this Thessalonian church who so knew that they were loved by the Lord Jesus Christ that they were willing to love one another please grant us great reassurance that one day you will return in victory and help us to love with the love that you have given us in Christ until that day Amen thank you