

Persevere in Persecution

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[0 : 00] is it easy to be a Christian in Australia? Chat to the people around you just for 30 seconds. Is it easy to be a Christian in Australia? I'm going to call time on that one. A good conversation over coffee. I wonder what you thought, whether it's easy to be a Christian in Australia. And I think if you reduce Christianity to being mere Western middle-class morals, then yes, it's easy to be a Christian in Australia. I mean, after all, Christianity is the foundation of Western civilization. That's probably why we sometimes feel it free and peaceful to be Christians here. But actually, for the more overt aspects of Christianity, we've seen that all it takes to expose the true environment is a retired tennis legend and her views on marriage. How would Margaret Court answer this question? Yes, she could have added more nuances to the things she said, but did you hear the anger and the venom directed at her? She was recently speaking at a corporate function and there was actually a protest outside. Not her, they said. Not here. No, it is not easy to be a Christian in Australia. In our culture, personally, persecution is more subtle than it is for our Egyptian or Iranian brothers and sisters.

Here, persecution is the snide remark. It's the sneering comment. It's the insults on social media. It's the tense relationships. It's the slow and steady social death. You see, these are all equally as dangerous as violence because they shake our faith just as much. The problem with persecution isn't necessarily how violent or illiberal it is. The problem is how much it shakes our faith. If you need more convincing that Australia is not that peaceful for us, just try combining the overt aspects of Christianity with your regular Monday to Friday and see what you get. So just try saying, wherever you find yourself, actually it's Monday to Saturday, just try working Jesus' name into a conversation and see what happens. Just try saying that he is the only way to God. Just try affirming Jesus' ethical standards in the areas of relationships or money or work, just as Margaret Court did, just as Margaret Court did and see what happens. No, it is not easy to be a Christian in Australia. You see, to experience any persecution, however subtle, is to walk a mile in the shoes of the Thessalonians. They were a tiny church in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica and as Andrew said, we met them for the first time in our reading from Acts 17. We heard that as soon as the Apostle Paul arrives with the gospel, the persecution also arrives. An angry mob formed to kill Paul.

He wasn't there, so they grabbed poor Jason instead. And why? Acts 17 verse 7 says, these men, they are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus. You see, it's not easy to be a Christian in Thessalonica either. The Greco-Roman world had only one king. He was called Caesar. He enforced this by imperial decree. But Paul's gospel says there is another king, one called Jesus. Paul's gospel says that King Jesus is God himself, that he came a first time to establish his kingdom in people's lives. Paul's gospel also says that he is coming another time, this time to establish his kingdom over the whole world.

This second coming is the theme of two Thessalonians. Paul says that upon his arrival, not only will Jesus vindicate and liberate us, his people, he will judge his enemies and thereby establishing this global kingdom. You see, for the Thessalonians, their present persecution had totally unsettled their faith. Where is this king then? Why are we still suffering? Have we missed the boat? Has he already come?

[4 : 54] And so Paul's aim is to calm their unsettled faith. He encourages them. Jesus is still on his way.

And in the meantime, you must persevere. So this letter is perseverance medicine. For us, in our meantime, because we too are still waiting for Jesus to return, we need this perseverance medicine also. Because it's no longer easy to be a Christian in Australia.

Because everyone out there has made of themselves and other things their own little Caesars. And that brings us into direct conflict because we follow another king.

And so my aim with this talk is that we would know the value of perseverance in light of Jesus' return. Let me say that again. My aim is that we would know the value of perseverance in light of Jesus' return. And that by doing that, two Thessalonians will become perseverance medicine for us as well. Please do keep your Bibles open. That would really help me. There's a handout with some points which explain where I'm going to go. We're at point one. Let me read from verse three. Chapter one, verse three. Paul's tone here is clearly one of pride.

[6 : 46] He ought always to thank God for them. He is right to do so. He boasts about them. And why? He says their faith is growing more and more and the love they have for one another is increasing. This growing faith and this increasing brotherly love, that is New Testament shorthand for Christian maturity. You see, all Christians are called to be mature or to keep maturing. We start as baby Christians and we're to keep growing spiritually.

And maturing in Jesus, growing spiritually in all its forms within the Bible can be boiled down to two things, a growing faith and a continued love for Jesus' people. Growing faith, continued love.

And that's what the Thessalonians are doing. And Paul is proud of them. But you see, this is the key. It is not just that they are doing this growing that has Paul so proud.

It is because it is in the face of verse four. Persecutions and trials. That is the setting that they find themselves in. Paul makes the link between their growing faith and increasing love in verse three and their perseverance and endurance in verse four.

At the start of verse four, that's what the therefore is there for. I'd love to do a whole sermon on the role of perseverance with regards to spiritual maturity.

[8 : 21] But you'd have to invite me back for that another time. But for now, when the trials and persecutions come, it is tempting to stop being a Christian.

Or at least I'll put my faith on ice. I'll put it in the closet until this trouble blows over. And then I'll bring it out of the closet again and continue my spiritual maturity.

But not the Thessalonians. When the persecutions come, it is Christian business as usual for them. Their faith was growing, says Paul.

They probably kept talking about Jesus in the public sphere, even within earshot of the angry mob. Paul says their love for one another is increasing.

They probably didn't stop meeting together. They probably didn't stop serving one another, even though that made them easier to find by the angry mobs. And this gives us, this morning, a very clear understanding of what real perseverance is.

[9 : 30] And I think it's this. I think it's maturing in Christianity during persecution. Maturing in Christianity during persecution.

Not stopping because of it. So let's, let me illustrate with a marathon runner. The marathon runner, he doesn't stop running when he feels that pain barrier.

He perseveres. He keeps going. What sort of a runner would he be if every time he felt the pain in his legs, he just takes a break for five minutes, waits for the pain to go away, and then on he goes. A few meters down the road, he feels that pain again because it's a marathon. And he stops again, waits five more minutes for the pain to go away. On he goes. So on and so forth, all the way to the finish line.

And apart from being the worst athlete of all time, his coach could never boast about his perseverance or endurance, could he? What sort of Christians would we be if the moment we feel pain or persecution, we just stop being Christians or we put our faith on hold until the trouble blows over?

[10 : 45] Paul says the Thessalonians were right to keep growing in their faith during the angry mobs. Paul always thanks God that the Iranian Christians are increasing in their love for one another.

That probably means by coming to church, even though that makes it easier for the gunmen to find them. That is perseverance. Paul boasts about Margaret Court, who lives according to God's word, even while they are debating taking her name off the stadium.

And Paul says that you are right to live according to the Bible, even though your family think you belong in the dark ages.

Paul always thanks God for you, because you keep talking about God and Jesus at work, even though you know it has limited your career. And Paul boasts about your Christian ethics, even when lifelong friends abandon you.

That is perseverance, says Paul. And this perseverance, it seems like a terrible life strategy, doesn't it?

[12:00] But Paul says it is right. It is boast-worthy because of the future that is coming. And this future is our second point.

Again, let me start by asking you a question. If you knew this year's winner of the AFL Grand Final, or Channel 10's MasterChef, it's my guilty pleasure, if you knew the winners already, what would you do now?

I won't ask you to actually answer that, because I might expose a gambling problem. But knowledge of the future affects your present, doesn't it?

That's not a groundbreaking thing to say. Knowledge of the future affects your present. But the level of the knowledge affects how, or changes how big an effect it has in the present.

And so in verses 6 to 10, Paul gives the Thessalonians the most important knowledge of the future, so it will have a drastic effect on their present.

[13:06] So let me start reading at verse 6. God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you, and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.

This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. These verses are a picture of God's justice. They stem from the start of verse 6 where it says God is just.

They talk about the future day when Jesus will return to judge the world. You see, this future day makes sense of why the Thessalonians would bother to persevere in the present.

Think back to our marathon runner. The future finish line makes sense of why he would bother to endure the pain of this marathon. If there's no future return of Jesus, there's no need for present perseverance because there's no judgment.

So no need to endure. No harm, no foul. You're not going to be judged for it. And so as soon as our Christianity moves us into harm's way, all you have to do is put your faith on ice.

[14:22] Just lock it away in the closet. Don't own up to anything. And then when the trouble blows over, you can pull it out again. No judgment coming. No harm, no foul. For the marathon runner to keep stopping when it gets painful, he is showing no regard for a future finish line.

In fact, he created a hundred finish lines as he went throughout the race. One might even say whether he was even competing in the race. This future return of Jesus is the present perseverance medicine.

It encourages the Thessalonians that one day Jesus will return and liberate his people and vindicate them as well. God's justice has a cosmic reversal of fortunes.

And so let's have a look. If you were a Thessalonian, not sure a violent mob is outside your door, you would need the medicine of verse 7.

That one day Jesus will turn your present trouble to relief. Would that encourage you? If you were a Thessalonian living presently through humiliation and opposition, you would need the medicine of verse 7 again.

[15:40] that Jesus will return in blazing fire with holy angels. Clearly, Jesus' return looks like an unmissable event. Paul is saying that you will be vindicated in front of the whole world.

One day everyone will know that you were always right all along. Does that do it for you? If you're a Thessalonian, you need the medicine of verses 9 and 10 where you'll be in the presence of the Lord and the glory of His might.

You see, once outside the centre of society, now inside the centre of the universe as you dwell in the presence and share in the glory of the Lord.

And remember, for us in Australia, persecution is more subtle. It's not the number of bruises that determines persecution. It's the level to which it unsettles our faith.

We too need the perseverance medicine of verses 7 to 10. This medicine says, one day everyone will see that you were right all along.

[16:52] One day the King will come to liberate you from your enemies. And of course, this cosmic reversal of fortunes has an implication for God's enemies as well.

These verses need some gentleness. Firstly, verse 6 says, he will pay back. Verse 8 says, he will punish. This means that retribution is Jesus' future job.

God, it's not our present one. They also require gentleness because I have immediate family and friends who are presently facing this future situation.

And I'm sure in a room this size, many of you will have family and friends who are facing the same present situation. Sometimes it's tough to delight in God's word.

And while this passage doesn't call for it specifically, let me just say a word about evangelism.

[18:01] Because while future judgment encourages present perseverance, it should also encourage present evangelism. These scary verses, they're the future.

And so as long as it is today, we must pray that our family and friends respond to Paul's gospel. We must pray for opportunities to talk to them about Jesus.

You might think it's more appropriate, given your family dynamics, for others to have a conversation with them about Jesus. As long as it is today, why not start six months of just friendliness and fun and relationship repair?

Don't say a word about Christianity so that by the time our carol services roll around and Christmas comes, you will have built up enough, I guess, goodwill you can invite them along where you know they'll hear the gospel.

We must act as long as it is today. Please do come and chat to myself or Andrew Price if you'd like to talk about an evangelism strategy that would be appropriate for your family and friends.

[19:19] We'd love to help you. It's our job. Let's go back to the Thessalonians. While we speak about the judgment of others with a lump in our throat, for the Thessalonians, this judgment was actually good news because it means Jesus will finally deal with their violent enemies.

That's what Paul promises in verse 6. The enemies causing them trouble are to be troubled themselves. That means the Thessalonians will be free.

This cosmic reversal of fortune continues in verse 8. He says, Jesus will punish those who don't know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might.

And if you're anything like me, you can hear your family and friends right at this point with these explosive verses saying, there you go again. This is precisely why I won't become a Christian.

How is it God can punish those who don't know Him? How is it I deserve God's punishment and everlasting destruction, it says. I just live my life like every other Australian out there.

[20:34] Clearly God is not just. But to understand this as justice, we have to take the two halves of verse 8 together. So the knowing God is related to the not obeying the gospel.

They don't know God because they don't obey the gospel. The word obey there, it means a summons.

So imagine the door is knocked and you answer the knock. That is a summons or an obeying of the knock. The good news of the gospel is a summons on our lives.

So literally, it is Jesus knocking on the door of our hearts with good news of His kingship and eternal life. His summons needs to be obeyed.

But you see, if we don't obey the gospel, how can we know the God of the gospel? We've rejected His only means of introduction. And so all that would be left is the grim punishment of verse 9.

[21:43] If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here this morning, but you want to rightly avoid all that terrible judgment, you must obey the gospel. There's no other way around it.

answer Jesus knock. Let Him be your King. And for the rest of us, this future day will keep us maturing spiritually.

It will keep us growing whatever the cost, whatever trials we face in this life, because it means we have another King who will come to liberate us and vindicate us in front of the whole universe.

Now, I just want to take us back to verse 5 because I think there's some tricky detail that just needs a little bit of explanation. So verse 5, all this is evidence that God's judgment is right.

And as a result, you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering. I think it's better if I paraphrase verse 5 like this. What does the Thessalonian persecution say about whose side they are on?

[22:57] Jesus says, if you are slandered or reviled for my name, then you show yourself to be one of my people. You see, the Thessalonian persecution authenticates them as Jesus' people.

Therefore, on the day of the Lord, when the Lord comes to the city of Thessalonica, there will be no surprises as to who's getting the judgment and who's getting the liberation. Their bruises and humiliation and suffering are evidence of whose side they're on.

It is a sign of their worthiness of God's kingdom. Imagine, if you can, the allied forces approaching a concentration camp during World War II, imagine two men in the camp.

One man is smoking a cigar. He's feeling relaxed. He's got execution orders all over his desk. The other man is in a tiny cell, overcrowded.

He's been beaten and tortured and starved. He looks barely human anymore. But even at this present stage, even before the forces of liberation have arrived, the evidence is clear as to who is going to get the liberation and who is going to get the judgment.

[24 : 19] They tell us whose side he's on. It's the same for those wearing the wounds of faith. You see, it's only instinctive to move away from things that harm us like you do with your hand on a hot surface.

But Paul says, know the value to hold on. Know the value of perseverance. Your present pain is evidence of your worthiness.

Let's be clear. He's not saying we should seek persecution as some sort of shortcut to heaven. But rather, persecution need not unsettle Christian faith.

Rather, it is evidence that Jesus is our king. It is evidence of whose side we're on. It is evidence that one day we will be vindicated in front of the whole universe.

Perseverance is just about the hardest thing in the Christian life. And so it's really encouraging that this section finishes with a prayer. And this is our final point. Prayer is verse 11 and 12.

[25 : 31] With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.

We pray this 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 the Lord Jesus Christ. We talked a lot today about putting your faith on hold until trouble blows over.

Paul's prayer is asking for the exact opposite thing. He says, do everything your Christian faith prompts you to do. Keep meeting together, keep serving one another, keep talking about Jesus, keep holding fast to the Bible, keep following the King, do everything your Christian faith prompts you to do.

Paul uses a much better shorthand in verse 11. He calls this the every desire for goodness and the every deed of faith. Keep growing and increasing.

We said that already. Keep maturing spiritually. Paul prays that they would keep doing this so that their perseverance will outlast their persecution until one day it will lead to a life of no more trials, just face to face with the King to dwell in his glory.

[27 : 00] Isn't that incredible? Why don't I pray for that for us as well? Father, we thank you for your word, we thank you for how clear it is, and we pray that you may make us worthy of your calling, that by your power you may bring to fruition our every desire for goodness and our every deed prompted by faith.

we pray this so that the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified in us and us in him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ in his name.

Amen.