

Persevere in Persecution

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[0 : 0 0] Here is a question. Is it easy to be a Christian in Australia? Discuss with the people next to you. Don't tell me. Is it easy to be a Christian in Australia? A good question to chat through over chicken and chips a little bit later.

Do you think it's easy to be a Christian in Australia? And I think if you reduce Christianity to being merely Western middle class morals, then yes, it's easy to be a Christian in Australia.

I mean, after all, Christianity, in effect, is the foundation of the Western civilization. It's probably why we find it sometimes free and peaceful to be Christians here in Australia.

But actually, for the more overt aspects of Christianity, I think 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 this morning? Yes, she could have been more nuanced in some of the things she said. But did you hear the anger and the venom that was directed towards her?

[1 : 0 9] She was recently speaking at a corporate function about her tennis and there was a protest outside the city. Not her, they said. Not here.

No, it is not easy to be a Christian in Australia. In our culture, persecution is more subtle than it is for our Egyptian brothers and sisters.

Here, persecution is the snide remark. It's the sneering comment. It's the insults on social media. It's the steady, slow social death.

And these subtle persecutions are equally as dangerous as the violent ones. And the reason why is because they unsettle our faith just as much.

The problem with persecution is not necessarily how violent or illiberal it is. The problem is how much it unsettles our faith. If you need more convincing that Australia is not actually that peaceful for us, just try combining the overt aspects of Christianity with your regular Monday to Friday and see what happens.

[2 : 2 4] So just try bringing Jesus' name into a conversation where you find yourself, Monday to Saturday as it is, and see what happens. Just try affirming that Jesus is the only way to God.

Just try holding fast to the Bible's ethics on relationships and sex and money and work, as Margaret Court did, and see what happens.

No, it is not easy to be a Christian in Australia. But 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, as Andrew said to us. And we met them in our first reading that Ross gave us from Acts 17. We heard that as soon as the apostle Paul had arrived with the gospel, the persecutions had also arrived.

An angry mob formed to kill Paul. He wasn't there, so they dragged out poor Jason instead. And Acts 17 verse 7 says, These men, they're all defying Caesar's decrees.

[3 : 33] They're 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 his kingship by royal decree. But the problem is, Paul's gospel says there is another king, one called Jesus.

Paul's gospel says that King Jesus is also God himself, that he came a first time to establish his kingdom in the lives of people. Paul's gospel also says that he is coming another time, this time to establish his kingdom over the whole world.

And it is this second coming, as we sang about in the song, it is this second coming which is the theme of this whole book to Thessalonians. Paul says that upon his arrival, not only will Jesus liberate and vindicate his people, he will defeat his enemies as well, and therefore establish this global kingdom.

You see, for the Thessalonians, their present persecution had left them totally unsettled in their faith. Where is this Jesus while we're suffering? Have we forgotten him?

[4 : 56] Has he forgotten us? Have we missed the boat? And so Paul's aim is to calm unsettled faith. He encourages them that Jesus is still on the way.

And in the meantime, they are to persevere. This letter, if you like, is perseverance medicine. And for us here in 2017, in our meantime, because we too are still waiting for Jesus' return, we need this perseverance medicine also.

Because you see, it is no longer safe and easy to be a Christian in Australia. Because out there, everyone has formed, of themselves and other things, their own little Caesars.

And that's where the conflict comes. Because we follow another king, don't we? And so my aim this morning is that we would know the value of perseverance in light of Jesus' return.

I'll say that again. My aim is that we would know the value of perseverance in light of Jesus' return. Please do keep your Bibles open. That would really help me.

[6 : 10] There's a handout, which you should have, which is some points, which explains where I'm going. And we're at point one. I'm going to read from verse three. We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so.

Because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches, we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

Paul's tone here is one of pride. He ought always to thank God. It is right to do so. He boasts about this tiny little church.

And the reason why is because, he says, their faith is growing more and more. Their love for one another is increasing. And you see, this growing faith and this love for one another, that is, I guess, a Bible shorthand of Christian maturity.

So all Christians are called to be mature. We start our spiritual lives as babies. And we're to grow and mature as Christians as we go through life. And all things we could do to mature ourselves can be summed up in those two things, a growing faith and a continued love for Jesus' people.

[7 : 32] However, and this is the key, I think, it is not just that they are maturing that has Paul so proud.

It is because it's in the face of verse four, persecutions and trials. See, Paul makes a link between their growing faith and increasing love in verse three with their perseverance and endurance in verse four.

I think that's what the therefore is therefore in verse four. I'd love to do a whole sermon on the relationship between perseverance and its role in maturing Christians.

But there'll have to be another time when Ridley's on holiday again. But you see, when trials and persecutions come, it is tempting to stop being a Christian, isn't it?

It's tempting to put our Christianity in the closet and put everything on hold, at least till the trouble blows over. And then we can pull it out of the closet again and resume our regular Christian maturity.

[8 : 34] It's tempting to do that. But not the Thessalonians. See, when the persecution comes, for them, it was business as usual.

Their faith was growing, says Paul. So I think they probably kept talking about Jesus in the public sphere, even within earshot of the angry mobs.

Paul says their love for one another was increasing. They probably didn't stop meeting together. They probably didn't stop serving one another, even though the angry mobs knew where to get them.

And that gives us a very clear picture of what perseverance is. And this is what I think it is. I think it's maturing in your Christianity during persecution.

So let me say that again. Perseverance is maturing in your Christianity during your persecution, not stopping because of it. Think of a marathon runner.

[9 : 37] Let's call him Andy. He doesn't stop running when he hits the pain barrier. He perseveres. He keeps running. What sort of runner would Andy be if the moment he felt some pain in his legs, he just stops?

He waits for five minutes till the pain goes away. Then he continues on. A few hundred metres down the road, the pain sets in again, as it does in a marathon. So he stops.

He waits a few minutes for the pain to go away. Then he starts running. So on and so forth. He stops so many times during the race. And apart from being the worst athlete of all time, Andy's coach could never boast about his perseverance, could he?

What sort of Christians would we be if the moment we feel the pain of persecution, we just put our Christianity on hold, at least till that trouble blows over?

Paul says that Thessalonians were right to keep growing in their faith amidst the angry mobs. Paul always thanks God that Egyptian Christians continue to grow in their love for one another.

[10 : 49] They probably keep meeting together in churches, even though that makes it easier for the gunmen to get them. Paul boasts about Margaret Court, who holds tight to the Bible's ethics, even while they are debating taking her name off the stadium.

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

Paul always thanks God that you keep talking about Jesus at work, even though you know for sure it has limited your career. That's perseverance. Paul boasts about your Christian ethics, even when lifelong friends abandon you.

That is perseverance. And I think Paul is probably, he could be the worst lifetime guru or life coach, because perseverance seems like a terrible life strategy, doesn't it?

But Paul says that perseverance is right. And that's because of the future that is coming. And this future is our second point.

[12 : 01] Again, turn to the person next to you only for 10 seconds this time. If you knew this year's winner of the AFL Grand Final or Channel 10's MasterChef, if you knew the winner now, what would you do?

10 seconds to your friends. Okay, that's 10. That's 10. That's 10. I'm not going to ask you what you said, because I might uncover a gambling problem at HCD.

But here it is. Knowledge of the future affects what we do in the present. That is not a radical thing to say. That's fairly obvious. But the quality of the knowledge will determine how great an effect it has on the present.

And in verses 6 to 10, Paul gives the most important knowledge about the future. Let me read at verse 6. He says, 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.

[13 : 12] They stem from verse 6. You see where it says God is just. Everything that comes after flows from that. These verses talk about a future day when Jesus returns to judge the world.

And it is this future day that makes sense of why the Thessalonians would bother to persevere in the present. The finish line reward makes sense of why Andy the runner would bother to persevere through the pain.

You see, if there's no future return, then there's no need for present perseverance. No future judgment. No need to endure. As soon as your Christianity moves you into harm's way, just put your Christianity on hold.

Put it in the closet. Put it on ice. No harm, no foul because there's no judgment. For the marathon runner to keep stopping throughout the race every time it gets painful, he is showing that that future finish line means nothing to him.

And actually he's created a hundred finish lines throughout the race. One might even ask whether he was even in the race at all. You see, this future return of Jesus is perseverance medicine for us.

[14 : 34] It encourages the Thessalonians as well that one day the king will return. That he will not only vindicate his people, but he will liberate them also.

These verses about justice, they reveal what I'm calling a cosmic reversal of fortune. So let's have a look. If you were a Thessalonian, not sure if 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 again of verse 7.

That says Jesus will return in blazing fire with his powerful angels. His return here, it looks to be an unmissable event. Paul is saying you will be vindicated in front of the whole universe.

One day everyone who has ever lived will see that you were 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 will be in the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might.

[15 : 54] You see, once outside the center of society and trade and things like that, now inside the center of the universe as you dwell with the king.

But do remember that persecution in Australia is more subtle. It's not the number of bruises that determines persecution. It's the level that your faith is unsettled.

And so we too need that medicine of verses 7 to 10. This medicine says that one day everyone will see that you were right all along. And one day your king will liberate you.

And of course, this cosmic reversal of fortunes has implications for God's enemies as well. These verses need gentleness. Firstly, verse 6, it says he will pay back.

Verse 8, he will punish. You see, retribution is Jesus' future job. It is not our present one.

[17 : 07] But these verses need gentleness also, because I personally have immediate family and friends who are presently facing the future judgment of verse 8 and 9.

I find it tough to delight in this part of God's word. And in a room this size, I bet you would find it tough also. I'm sure many of you have immediate family and friends who are also in this present situation.

This passage doesn't call for it, but at this point, let me say a word about evangelism. You see, the future return of Jesus has a present implication on perseverance. We've said that. But it also has a present implication on evangelism.

These scary verses, they are the future. But as long as it is today, we must pray that our family respond to Paul's gospel.

As long as it is today, we must talk to them about Jesus. It might be more appropriate, given your family dynamic, to have someone else speak to them about Jesus.

[18 : 16] It might be more appropriate to invite them to church, where Andrew Price will give them the gospel. As long as it is today, why don't we start six months of just friendliness and fun and relationship repair, so that by the time Christmas rolls around, you will have built up enough, I guess, goodwill, you can invite them to one of our carol services, where you know they'll hear the gospel clearly presented.

As long as it is today, we must act. There's no, there is no, I've tried this, there's no sidestepping these verses. Please do come and talk to me or Andrew Price if you'd like to discuss an evangelism strategy for your family and friends.

We must act. Let's go back to the Thessalonians. While I speak about judgment with a lump in my throat, these verses are good news for the Thessalonians, because it means that Jesus will one day deal with their violent enemies.

That's what Paul promises in verse 6. He says, their enemies causing them trouble are to be troubled themselves. There's a reversal of fortune. He continues in verse 8.

He will punish those who do not 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.

[19 : 45] And if you're anything like me, you can just hear your immediate family and friends going, there you go again. This is precisely why I can't become a Christian. How can God punish those who, as it says, don't know him?

How is it I deserve the punishment and everlasting destruction? I'm just trying to live my life like every other Australian out there. Clearly, God is not just.

But to understand these verses as justice, we need to hold the two halves of verse 8 together. So the knowing God is related to the obeying the gospel.

They don't know God because they've not obeyed the gospel. The word obey here, it means a summons. So just as when there's a knock on the door, you obey the knock.

The knock is a summons. The good news of the gospel is a summons on our lives. Quite literally, it is Jesus knocking at the door of our hearts with good news.

[20 : 52] Good news of his kingship. Good news of eternal life. His summons must 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 all that is left is that grim punishment of verse 8 and 9. Of being shut out of the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here this morning, you're so welcome amongst us. We're so thrilled that you are here. But if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you want to rightly, in your good sense, avoid that terrible judgment from verses 8 and 9, you must obey the gospel.

You must answer Jesus knock. You must let him be your king. And for the rest of us, this future return means we must keep maturing spiritually.

Whatever it costs us in this life, whatever persecutions and trials we have to endure, the worst thing they can do is kill us. Because we have another king who is coming on a day to vindicate us in front of the universe and to liberate us into his presence and glory.

[22 : 22] Now I just want to take us back to something else that will help us from verse 5. I skipped over verse 5. There's some tricky detail in there and I want to address that now. Let me read. 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 as follows. What does the Thessalonian persecution show about whose side they're on?

Jesus says, if you're slandered and reviled for my name, you show yourself to be one of my people. And so for the Thessalonians, their persecution authenticates whose side they're on.

And so on the day of the Lord, when he comes to Thessalonica, there will be no surprises as to who is getting the liberation and who is getting the judgment. Their bruises and humiliation, they evidence whose side they're on.

It's a sign of their worthiness of God's kingdom. Imagine, if you can, the Allied forces approaching a concentration camp during World War II.

[23 : 31] Imagine two people at the camp. One man, he's there smoking a cigar. He's got his feet up on the desk and there are execution orders all over that desk.

There is another man and he's in a cell with a hundred other prisoners and he's been beaten and tortured and starved and he looks less than human.

But even now, even at this present stage, before the forces of liberation have arrived, it is clear who is getting the liberation and who is getting the judgment.

The wounds of persecution are all over the prisoner. They tell us whose side he's on. There'll be no surprises when the Allies arrive. It is the same for Christians who wear the wounds of faith.

You see, it's only instinctive to move ourselves out of harm's way, like when you move your hand away from a hot surface. Paul says, know how valuable perseverance is.

[24 : 38] Know that your present pain is evidence of your future worthiness. Perseverance is just about the hardest thing in the Christian life and so it's encouraging that this passage and our talk today finishes with a prayer.

This is verse 11 and 12. This is our final point. Paul says, or Paul prays, 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. All the way through our talk today we've talked about putting your faith on hold when times get tough.

This prayer in verse 11 is asking for the exact opposite thing. Paul says, or prays, do everything your Christian faith prompts you to do.

Do everything. Keep meeting together, keep serving one another, keep holding fast to the Bible, keep talking about Jesus, keep honoring the King. Paul uses a shorthand.

[25 : 55] He calls it the every desire for goodness and the every deed of faith. Do everything your faith prompts you to do, he says. Keep growing and increasing.

Keep maturing. And Paul prays that when they do that, their perseverance will outlast their persecution because it will lead to a life of no more trials, no more suffering, just face to face with Jesus in glory.

Talk about perseverance medicine. shall I pray for that for us too? Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for how clear it is. And we pray, Father, that you may make us worthy of your calling and that by your power you may bring to fruition our every desire for goodness and our every deed prompted by faith, regardless of the persecution.

and we pray this so that the name of our 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.

[27 : 09] Amen.