

April 18, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

We Are Destined for This

1 Thessalonians 3:1 – 8

Before we dive into chapter three this morning, we have some unfinished business from last week. Last week if you remember, we saw from chapter two, verses 13 – 16 that we not only need to be under the hearing of the word of God – but we also need to embrace it. That is we need to take it to heart, let it penetrate, let it work in us, wrap our arms around it and let it have its effect. Paul was rejoicing that these Thessalonians not only heard Paul's message as the word of God, but embraced it as the word of God - they received it. He knew that because the word was in action as it were in their lives. They had mixed the word of God with faith. We need to take the word we hear and mix it with faith, which means we are engaged in a radical obedience to what God has said. Because real faith is real action – doing what God has said regardless of how you feel because He commands it. Our thinking has been corrupted by the sin that indwells us and needs to be renewed to the truth of God's word. And we saw that because our minds are the chief target of the Holy Spirit's transformation work, we need to receive and embrace the word of God by **meditating over it, memorizing it, and minding it.**

And then we come to verses 17-20: *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, because we wanted to come to you--I, Paul, again and again--but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.* 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20. At least twice Paul's desire was to come to the Thessalonians and minister among them – but Satan hindered Paul's coming. He effectively set up roadblocks to his coming that prevented him from doing so. My question is – what are we to make of this? How is it that Satan can hinder what is so clearly the work of God? Isn't God all-powerful and sovereign? Doesn't His will supercede Satan's will? How is it that Satan can hinder or put up roadblocks to the work of God?

We get some understanding of this by looking at the book of Job. In Job chapter one, we read: *'Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it." The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? "Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. "But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face." Then the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD.* Job 1:6-12

First of all you should notice that it was God who set Job up. He introduces the subject: *Have you considered My servant Job?* **God initiates and incites all the subsequent actions of Satan.** And then Satan responds as God intends by saying that if God touches or adversely affects all that Job has, Job's righteousness will be shown to be hypocrisy. And then God says *'Go ahead and do what you want'*. Notice that Satan knew about Job – he'd been out roaming about and walking around the earth – presumably he could have interrupted Job's life at any time – but he hadn't. And the reason he hadn't is because he didn't have God's permission to do so. In fact, there was a hedge, a wall, a fence around Job that Satan couldn't get through unless God removed it.

There are many things to take away from this, but the two most important things are these: **Satan can only hinder us as far as God allows – and his hindering is all part of God's plan in our lives.** What this boils down to is that Satan is simply a tool in the hand of God to accomplish His purpose in us and in the world. Notice that Satan says to God: *put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face'*. And God says, *'Go do it'*. In other words, the evil work that Satan did in Job's life, came from God, was ordained by God, but in the end God gets all the glory. God never does evil, but He will send or permit or move others to do evil, and that sending and permitting and moving is all part of His plan and purpose. What this says, along with many other passages in the Bible is that **nothing, no good thing or no evil thing, arises, exists or endures independently of God's will and plan.**

This is why Paul can go on in chapter three and tell the Thessalonians that they were **destined**, as

God's chosen and redeemed and beloved children, **to suffer affliction**. Listen to what he says, *Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.* 1 Thessalonians 3:1-3

Destined for this? Destined for what? **Destined for affliction**. The church in Thessalonica was encountering affliction, and Paul's desire was that they wouldn't be moved by those afflictions. The word '**moved**' here in classical Greek was used to describe a dog wagging his tail. It is a great description of what happens sometimes when affliction comes into our lives. Like a tail on a dog, we are shaken in every direction. In fact this word is related to the verb that means **to shake** or **agitate**. And Paul is saying that he sent Timothy to establish and exhort them in the faith so that they won't be shaken or agitated by this affliction. And just like Paul, I don't want you to be shaken by affliction. That is why I want to establish you in the faith and exhort you in the faith so that when affliction comes your faith will be solid and sure and not shaken.

Because this is our destiny as believers. Affliction has come, is come, is coming for all those who belong to Christ. **It is normal Christianity to suffer affliction**. What is not normal is for Christians not to suffer. Paul told the Thessalonians: *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.* 1 Thessalonians 3:4 Peter told the believers in Asia Minor: *'Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose...'* 1 Peter 4:1 And later in chapter 5: *'After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.'* 1 Peter 5:10 Anyone who preaches differently is not preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Be wary of those who emphasize just the 'feel good' bits. Because when affliction comes, and you are not prepared, you will be shaken like the tail on a big yellow lab. And you may find your faith shipwrecked on the shoals of bad theology.

Peter says again in chapter four of his first letter: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.* 1 Peter 4:12-13 We ought not to be blindsided by suffering. We ought not to think that this is strange or unheard of. We should not think that God has somehow abandoned us or is punishing us or is out to get us. There is a kind of suffering that comes from being disobedient to God – but this is not that. **This is the suffering of affliction that God has ordained for His children for their good and His glory.**

Paul uses the word **affliction** here three times in this passage and it is the same word translated '**tribulation**' in chapter one. This is the Greek word, **thlipsis**, and it means **affliction, oppression, tribulation, pressure**, and it is derived from a root word that means **to crush** or **squeeze**. **God has designed that the path to glory be one that crushes or squeezes us – afflicts us**. We see it in the life of Christ: *Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried ; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities ; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.* Isaiah 53:4-5 We see it in the life of Paul and the other apostles: *but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,* 2 Corinthians 6:4-5

I want you to get this. I want you to have a strong and robust and resilient faith that cannot be shaken by adverse circumstances or calamity. I want you to have a rock-solid assurance of hope when the doctor tells you that you have cancer and it doesn't look good – or when all your life goes up in smoke in a house fire – or when chronic, debilitating pain makes life seem pointless – or when the life of your child who should have outlived you is tragically cut short. I want you to rest in the calm assurance of the absolute sovereignty of God when earthquakes in Haiti or China or hurricanes in New Orleans or tsunamis in Thailand threaten our belief in a loving and merciful heavenly Father. I want you to be able to say with Job, *'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, Blessed be the name of the Lord.'* Job 1:21 I want you to hear and embrace the words of the apostles as they visited the new-in-the-faith saints in Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, strengthening their souls and encouraging them to continue in the faith and endure through affliction by saying, *"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."* Acts 14:22

This was Paul's message to the Thessalonians as well: *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. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you-- for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.* 1 Thessalonians 3:5-8

I consider my work successful if you stand fast as well. And so at the risk of overemphasizing, I want to emphasize this, this morning. First, because Paul emphasizes this and the word of God emphasizes this. But also because this kind of message is either not preached in pulpits in many churches today, or is even preached against. The message of the gospel – the message of the cross – the message that if we follow Christ – truly follow Him – we will suffer affliction in this life – has been supplanted in favor of a message that is unbelievably light and shallow and entertaining, and will not hold you when bad things happen. The church of God, at least here in America has not been willing to expend the energy to go deep with God in His word and extract all the goodness and joy that is there in passages like this. **There are few Samuel Rutherfords today who thank God for the cellars of affliction because the great King keeps His best wine there.**

As a result, the church of God is ill-prepared to minister to hurting people when evil and calamity and suffering overtake people. John Piper said a few years ago in the *Desiring God National Conference* that **'The popular God of fun-church is simply too small and too affable to hold a hurricane in His hand.'** That is, our view of God is too small and too limited. While we may agree that God has the power and right to govern all things, we hesitate to say that He in fact does govern all things for His own wise and holy purposes. We are more prone to say that God did not ordain this evil, but that He can take the evil that men do, He can take the calamity that nature dishes out, He can take the affliction that I am suffering and turn it all to good.

But the God of the Bible is supreme and sovereign over all suffering, all affliction, all calamity, all evil – just as He is sovereign over all that is good and right and lovely. God is absolute and eternal and infinite just as everyone else is dependent and finite and contingent. He is the supreme value in the universe and anything that has any value has it through connection to Him. He has all authority and power and wisdom and He is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. **And He has ordained every good thing and every bad thing that comes our way for our good and His glory.** It is the absolute sovereignty of a loving and gracious God that puts backbone in our faith when we are pressured or crushed or squeezed by adverse circumstances.

I want to conclude today by spending a little time on this foundational truth. Specifically, that God is sovereign over all our affliction, and indeed, destined us for this. He not only works in our afflictions to do us good and bring glory to His name – **He planned that very affliction in eternity past.** That is the implication of verse 3 where Paul writes to help the Thessalonians not to be shaken by affliction by saying: **For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.** We are destined to be pressed and squeezed by affliction, by adversity, by the pressures of life – and it is God's hand that moves everything in its collision course with our lives – on purpose. Next week, Lord willing, we will look at the why – but first you need to be convinced of the what – that God indeed governs everything in this universe.

Let's turn to that familiar story in Genesis – the story of Joseph. And I don't believe that it is an accident that God spends more time on Joseph's story than He does on the Father of all who come to faith – Abraham. I don't think Moses thought, 'Hey this is a really great story' and proceeded to get into all the details of the saga of Joseph. But it is in those details that we see clearly the sovereign hand of God in our lives.

We won't read the entire thing this morning – but many of you know the story: Joseph is born to Jacob and Rachel, one of two boys Rachel had – and Jacob spoiled him rotten. So much so that his brothers hated Joseph, and Joseph didn't help things out by telling them his wild dreams that had him ruling over them. So when the opportunity arose – these brothers sold him into slavery to a passing caravan that sold him again in Egypt to a man named Potiphar. There, in slavery, Joseph prospered until he was falsely accused of trying to rape Potiphar's wife and got thrown into prison. But God was with him even there and Joseph rose to the top in prison. And then we finally read that Joseph became the number two guy in the whole Egyptian empire under Pharaoh. And one day his brothers come calling because of the famine in the land to buy food and guess who meets them? Only they didn't recognize him and Joseph tests their hearts by requiring them to return again with their youngest brother Benjamin in tow. So when they come back, we begin to see the details in God's sovereignty over all things, particularly this morning, over all our affliction.

Do you see the affliction in Joseph's life? Hated by his brothers, thrown into a pit, sold as a slave, falsely accused, thrown into prison? That is affliction – that is squeezing – that is pressure and crushing. **And we need to understand that it is God who ordains all this for us – *destines us to it.*** In chapter 45 of Genesis we come to the point. When his brothers return for the second time, with Benjamin – Joseph tells them who he is: *Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.* Genesis 45:4-5

Notice the language: '**You sold me – God sent me**'. The brother's decision to sell Joseph was God's decision to send him. Joseph presses this point home in verse 7: *God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.* Genesis 45:4-5 If Joseph did not understand that the evil of the brother's selling worked to effect the good of God's sending – he would have had them shot on the spot. He says it again in verse 8: *"Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God"* Genesis 45:4-5. In other words, God ordained the evil work of the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. This was not a case of God making the best of a bad situation. This was not God reacting to cover evil with good. This was a sovereign, purposeful God planning beforehand the evil that the brothers did and the deliverance that evil would provide.

In fact that is what Joseph says at the end of this story in Genesis 50. When Jacob died, the brothers were still fearful that Joseph might want to get even with them without Jacob to intercede for them. So they got together and cooked up a story about Jacob leaving a last commandment for Joseph not to take revenge after he died but to forgive his brothers. They still didn't get it. I think that is why the Scriptures say Joseph wept when they told him this story. But then he said: *"Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place ? "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."* Genesis 50:19-20 He didn't let them off the hook – they still bore the responsibility before God for the evil they did. But he says that '*...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...*' and grammatically, the '*it*' that God meant for good is the '*evil*' his brothers meant against Joseph. Another way to say this is, 'As for you, my brothers, by selling me into slavery you meant evil against me, but God meant that evil event for good.' **Which is saying that God ordains both the evil willing of the brothers and the good outcome in the end.**

This may be the deep end of the pool for you this morning. You might find yourself taking up a little slack in your theological belt. That's okay. We need to wrestle with hard texts because we find some strong medicine in them to help us when we find ourselves weak in affliction. There are many, many texts we could point to this morning that all point to this same truth. We could look at the book of Ephesians: *also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,* Ephesians 1:11 Did you notice the inclusive words – **all things**? Not some things – not just the 'good bits' – not just pleasant circumstances – all things. We could ask Solomon, one of the wisest men ever to have lived and he might tell us as he did in Ecclesiastes: *In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider - God has made the one as well as the other* Ecclesiastes 7:14 **He makes days of prosperity and days of adversity.** And this is the kind of thinking that prompted Job – one of the most afflicted people in the Bible to say to his wife when she advised him to curse God and die: *Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity ?" Job 2:10*

But there are no examples so powerful and pointed as the example of our Lord Jesus. God, who came to earth as the man Christ Jesus, lived thirty-three and a half years, was falsely accused, unjustly condemned and unrighteously crucified by evil, wicked people who perpetrated the worst crime in all of human history. And yet when Peter preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost **his perspective was not that this crime was some great evil that God had not foreseen.** Listen to what he said: *Men of Israel, listen to these words : Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know - this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.* Acts 2:22-23

Notice – **it was by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God and by the culpable actions of evil men.** And when these people heard this, they didn't say, 'O, well if it was God's plan all along then we're not guilty'. No, the word says that they were pierced to the heart – they acknowledged their guilt and their evil and sin, and said, '**Brothers, what must we do?**' It almost takes your breath away to think that **in the most awful act ever done, the cruel torture and crucifixion of God's sinless Son by wicked, evil men, is found the most wonderful, life-giving blessing** – and God ordained it. He ordained the evil that killed His Son and He ordained all the good that flows from Calvary's mount.

So what should we take away from this? How does this help us in our day to day living? How does knowing that God ordains affliction for those who love Him work to strengthen our Christian walk? First of all it should **inspire confidence in God**. If we have a God that only controls one end of the spectrum – the good that may come from evil, then we have a God that is effectively hamstrung. He can only react – not truly act. He has no effective control over sickness and suffering and affliction. He does not rule over wicked evil men who do wicked evil things. He can only stand and look with the rest of the angels and humanity at the horror that goes on in the world and then try to deal with it as best He can. And that is not a God who is sovereign over all things. Or one that works all things for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge ; Let me never be ashamed. In Your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; Incline Your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of habitation to which I may continually come ; You have given commandment to save me, For You are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, Out of the grasp of the wrongdoer and ruthless man, For You are my hope ; O Lord GOD, You are my confidence from my youth. By You I have been sustained from my birth...' Psalm 71:1-6

Knowing that God ordains affliction for those who love Him – for those who have been called should **give us great hope**. *"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Job 13:15 Our hope is rooted in the rock-solid foundation of His great love for us and that He will withhold no good thing from those who walk uprightly. Psalm 84:11*

Knowing this should **comfort us when we in distress**. *But as for me, I shall sing of Your strength ; Yes, I shall joyfully sing of Your lovingkindness in the morning, For You have been my stronghold And a refuge in the day of my distress. Psalm 59:16*

Knowing this should **stop our mouths from sinful complaining**. *Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD ; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. Numbers 11:1 There is a distinction between legitimate complaining and sinful complaining. For example in the Psalms we have the greatest examples of complaining that is legitimate and righteous: Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur, And He will hear my voice. He will redeem my soul in peace from the battle which is against me, Psalm 55:17-18 Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint ; Preserve my life from dread of the enemy. Psalm 64:1 I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare my trouble before Him. Psalm 142:2*

This is complaining mixed with prayer to God that says, 'My situation is desperate – I am in anguish and pain – but You O Lord know this and hear my prayer and You will deliver me at the right time.' Sinful complaining does not recognize God's sovereignty over all things, good and bad, and seeks to justify itself in His sight.

Knowing this should **give us reason for joy** in the midst of sorrow and pain. *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2*

Knowing this should **strengthen our resolve and encourage our endurance**. *but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, 2 Corinthians 6:4*

I pray this morning that this word would be a strong solace to your souls and a mighty weapon in your fight of faith against the enemies of doubt and despair and bitterness when you find yourselves pressed and squeezed and crushed by affliction and tribulation. I pray you would know that His grace is sufficient in every circumstance, every situation, in every affliction. Let the absolute sovereignty of God put backbone in your faith and know that He loves you absolutely and has destined that the path to glory leads through the valley of affliction.

Our gracious God and loving Father,

Grant us to know without doubt and fear that You are supreme and sovereign over all suffering, all affliction, all calamity, all evil – just as You are sovereign over all that is good and right and lovely. Have mercy on us in our frail and fallible condition. Grant us the grace to trust that You are good in all Your works and all Your ways, and that You intend good for those who love You always. May we never doubt that goodness or Your sovereignty even in the most painful times. Let the bones you have broken rejoice – let the wounds You cause be bound up again with Your healing touch. Where You cause tears to flow be a strong comfort to our souls and joy to our hearts. Let this truth help steel our hearts against the fiery arrows of doubt and despair that trouble may bring. Fix our hopes so fully on the joys of heaven that we embrace all the good and adversity You ordain for us with glad and thankful hearts. May our everlasting memories of Your grace cause us to delight in You through Jesus Christ, spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.