

2 Thessalonians is a letter written to a congregation under attack, under attack from persecution from the world as well as under attack from false teachers. Satan was doing everything that he could to destroy the faith of this little group of people! And so Paul writes the letter of 2 Thessalonians as a way of encouraging them and encouraging us too. Because the main message that this letter has to bring us is to stand firm and to hold on to what you have been taught. Because when you do that, Christians, you will be able to withstand all of the attacks of the world.

But what exactly were the Thessalonians having to deal with? What was their situation? To answer that question, we need to go back to Acts chapter 17. If you have your Bible with you this evening, I'd encourage you to open up to there, to Acts chapter 17. Because here we meet Paul on his second missionary journey, and he's heading west into what was then called Macedonia, which is today part of northern Greece. And we meet him in the beginning of this chapter: "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews." It was very natural for Paul to stop here in Thessalonica, because it was a very important city. On the one hand, this is where the Roman government had its seat in the area. It was also the commercial hub of the whole region. And besides that, it was just a very large city, anywhere from 60,000 people to 200,000 people, which in those days was an enormous city. So Paul stopped here, then, because if you want to get the Gospel to as many people as possible, you go to where people are. You go to these big cities, and then the Gospel would spread out from there. But the other important reason why he stopped here is because there's a synagogue. There's many Jews who live inside the city, and Paul, at least at this point, is going to the Jews to bring them the good news of Jesus Christ.

So what does he do when he gets there? Verse 2: "And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women." So Paul went into the city to the synagogue, and he preaches Jesus and him crucified. And God blesses that preaching! Some of the Jews come to believe in Jesus. And many of the Greeks who were connected to the synagogue also come to believe in Jesus. And even some of the elite women of the city, some of the upper society of Thessalonica, also come to believe in Christ, because Paul has been preaching to these people Jesus and him crucified. A brand new congregation was born there in Thessalonica!

But it wasn't very long, unfortunately, before trouble arose. Three weeks, in fact, is all it took. And we hear the trouble here in verse 5: "But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd." The Jews are jealous for a couple of reasons. On one hand, Paul has been very, very successful. They've been in Thessalonica for many, many years, hardly had any success. But now here comes Paul, and in three weeks, he's gathered together a congregation? They're jealous of that. They don't like it. Who is this guy to come in and to do what he's doing? But the other reason why they're jealous is because these converts almost all came from the synagogue. They see Paul as a thief, as someone who is stealing people away, taking them away from the synagogue and away from their influence. And so to get back at Paul,

they stir up this riot, because they want to shut him down, to make him be quiet. And they attacked the house of Jason, who was one of the new Christians, in an effort to find Paul.

But verse 6: "And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.'" The Jews accuse the Christians of being political trouble. You let these guys into your city, and they're going to take away the peace! They're going to take away law and order. They're even speaking against the Roman emperor! They want to set Jesus up as the emperor instead! It was all a lie, of course. But even in our day, if you call someone something like a domestic terrorist, it doesn't matter if it's true. The very fact that you call them that is enough to destroy their reputation. And unfortunately that's what happens with Paul. The city officials gather together, and they tell him, "You can't stay here anymore. You've got to go. You have to leave." And so he left the city after being there only three weeks.

So you can understand, then, why Paul is concerned for the Thessalonians. Think about what they're going through. They're a brand new congregation. They've only been Christians for three weeks. They're under attack from both the Greeks and the Jews, ferocious attacks. And on top of that, Paul can't even be there to help them! What was going to happen to these people? Would they be able to stand firm in the face of such a trial? Paul himself would write later in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2: "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." Satan was working against them. Satan was keeping Paul out of Thessalonica. Satan was stirring up the Greeks and the Jews against this little congregation. Satan was doing everything that he could to destroy their faith. So what was going to happen to the Thessalonians there in that big city?

But Christians, a very remarkable thing happened! This little congregation, despite the odds, survived! And not only did they survive, but they thrived. They were thriving under persecution. They were becoming stronger and stronger than ever before, so that no matter what Satan threw at them, no matter what they were going through, the Thessalonians were steadfast in their faith. And Paul was overjoyed about that, to know that they were being so strong, that they were being so steadfast in their faith. Yes, they had their problems. Of course they did. Every congregation has problems. That's why he wrote these letters in the first place. 1 Thessalonians in the year 50, 2 Thessalonians in the year 52. He wanted to help them get through those problems. But he could still rejoice in them, knowing that they were steadfast in their faith. So steadfast, in fact, that he boasted of them, as we heard in our reading: "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." He's not boasting about them in a worldly way, saying something like, "These guys are so awesome, and you guys are so terrible." That's not what he's doing. He is boasting about them because they are an example of what it means to be steadfast, of what it means to hold onto God despite great pressure. And so we too today can imitate the Thessalonians and stand firm against the pressures of the world. And we can look to what they did in order to learn what that means.

So Christians, how do we imitate them then? What should we do in the face of trouble? The first thing we should do is that we shouldn't be surprised when we run into trouble. I don't know why that happens today. We as Christians seem to think that we're never going to have any troubles as Christians. But Jesus didn't say that. He says very clearly in John 15 verse 18, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you." The world hates Jesus, Christians. Make no mistake about that. It hates Jesus because Jesus is the truth, and the world loves lies. And because it hates Jesus, it's going to hate those who belong to Jesus. And because it attacked Jesus for speaking the truth, it will also attack those who belong to him for speaking the truth. We shouldn't be surprised by that when it happens. It's part of what it means to be a Christian in this life. But Jesus told us that it's going to happen, as he says in John 16: "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away." And when we know that it's going to happen, it won't take us by surprise, and we can be prepared for what is coming.

The second thing that we should learn from the Thessalonians is to remember the promises that Christ has made to us. A promise like John chapter 10: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Think about that. Jesus is saying that no one can take you out of his hand, that those who believe in Jesus are safe in his mighty hand. And no one on earth, not the government, not your boss, not a persecutor, no one, not even Satan himself can take you away from the Lord! That should comfort us in the midst of our trials, to know that we are safe in his hands!

And the last thing that we should learn from the Thessalonians is that our time of suffering is short. As Paul says in Romans chapter 8: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." The things you're going through right now, Christians, is nothing in comparison with what is to come. Because think of it this way. What is a year of suffering, what is five years, what is ten years, what is fifty years of suffering in comparison with eternity, knowing that God has done all things, and has prepared for us a joy far beyond our wildest expectations? What is a lifetime of suffering for the sake of the Gospel in comparison with the joy that we will see Jesus face to face? It doesn't matter what the world takes away from us, because we're going to get back something far greater in the life to come! And even if they do take away our lives, even if they take the very last thing that we might want to hold on to, yet we will be with the Lord. So what is the world going to do to us? What can they do to us? Because even if they do the very worst, we go to be with the Lord. And that should strengthen us, so that we can withstand all temptations, all assaults on our faith, knowing that the Lord is for us.

So Christians, let us imitate the Thessalonians. Let us stand firm and hold on to what we have been taught. Because Jesus has already told us what's going to happen. And Jesus has promised us that he holds us in his mighty hand. And Jesus has prepared for you a joy far beyond our wildest expectations. We can stand firm, because Jesus wins, and we will win with him too!

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, as the victory over all things. Help us to remain steadfast under trial, knowing that you have prepared for us a glory and a joy far beyond anything that we can imagine. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.