

Suffering is something that Christians in every time and place have struggled with, because it leads us to ask: why do bad things happen to Christians? Why are we suffering the things that we are? But the most difficult suffering that we ever have to deal with is when evil seems to be winning. When evil is on the rise, when they are getting away with everything that they're doing, and they're attacking the church besides, that leads us to ask: where can I find comfort? Where can I find relief in the midst of all of this? What is the point of my suffering?

Because the Thessalonians in our reading for tonight certainly struggled with these questions too. Because you might remember from last week, when we talked about the book of Acts, the Thessalonians were being attacked by the Jews. The Jews were trying to silence Paul, to get him to stop preaching the gospel. The Jews were attacking the new congregation, even dragging some of its members off to the city authorities to give them false charges. And the Jews also stirred up those city authorities to drive Paul out of the city. But we shouldn't even think that that was the end of it. After Paul was gone, I'm sure every day those Christians had to deal with the pressure to come back to the synagogue, to give up being a Christian, to give up Jesus, as well as just being generally harassed in everything that they did. So the Thessalonians were wondering: what's the point of all of this? Why do we have to go through this? When are we going to find relief?

But to answer these questions, Paul says a rather amazing thing. He says, "This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God." Notice what he does not say here. He doesn't say, "Just deal with it." He doesn't say, "This is something you should just go along to get along with so they'll leave you alone." It's not something that's just happening. "This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God." And what is that "this"? What is he talking about? Suffering! Your suffering "is the evidence of the righteous judgment of God." And what makes that so surprising to us, what makes that so amazing to us is we probably think that that's backwards. We probably think, "No, it's the evildoers who should be suffering! They are the ones who should be going through these things, and the Christians shouldn't." And the reason we think that way, Christians, is because very often we see suffering as something bad. We see suffering as something evil, as something to be avoided. Do anything you can to get away from it. Do anything that you need to do to just deal with it or even just ignore it. But whatever you do, don't suffer! To use an analogy, think of it like physical pain. We don't like pain either. We have no patience for it. That's why we have pills. That's why we have painkillers. That's why we have medicines. We do everything that we can to get away from it, because we consider to be something bad.

But Christians, suffering is not something to be avoided. Paul says, in fact, that it is something for our benefit. As he goes on to say here in verse 5: "That you may be considered worldly of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering." So in other words, suffering is part of what it means to be a Christian. Because Jesus suffered for us, Christians. And because we have been united with him, we are part of his body. We suffer along with him. And this suffering, Paul tells us, prepares us for heaven. It prepares us for something that is far greater to come. Because just as Jesus went through suffering to enter into glory, so we too will go through suffering with him to enter into that same glory. And so it is a great thing, it is a beneficial thing for us to suffer as a Christian now, because it shows us that something better is coming. Let me use another analogy here so maybe you understand what I mean. It's sort of like medicine. There are many medicines that we take that make us feel terrible. They make us just feel awful. If drank some poison, for

example, and I needed to purge it out, the medicine that I took is not going to make me feel good. It's going to be miserable, and I'll probably think it's one of the worst things I ever have to do. But I take it because I know it will save my life! Because I know that it is for my benefit. And Christian suffering is the same way. It is a medicine preparing us for heaven, because it looks forward, not to the suffering that we're going through right now, but to the glory and the life that will be ours when we enter into heaven with Christ.

But I do want to make a few things clear here, because I know this is a difficult subject. I am not saying that any suffering brings us closer to God, as if anyone in the world who was suffering for any reason was going to go closer to God for that reason. No, it is suffering as a Christian that we're talking about here. If I suffer as a unbeliever, that's just suffering. There is nothing else about it. But suffering as a Christian makes all the difference in the world, because, as Paul tells us in Romans, "All things work together for good for those who love God." He doesn't say, "All things work together for good for those who are suffering," as if that applied to anybody. "All things work together for good for those who love God." God turns our suffering into something beneficial, into something that helps our souls.

I'm also not saying here that we should seek out suffering, as if we should try to make our lives more miserable than it already is. No, that's not what God wants us to do. Nor should we ignore people who are suffering. If we can help them, God wants us to help them. But what we have to understand is that God lays the cross upon us. And whatever God does for us is good, and it is meant for our benefit, even if we can't understand how right now. And so, as Jesus tells us, "Take up your cross and follow me," because through that suffering as a Christian, we are being made more like Jesus.

But the best part about suffering, Christians, is that it is only temporary. It's something that will come to an end. God will bring it to an end, and he will give justice to his people. As we hear, starting in 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." God is going to afflict those who afflict his church. God will judge those who attack his people. Evil is not going to get away with it. The things we are enduring at the hands of the world are not just going to be forgotten. God will set all things right and give relief to his people and give them the comfort which they need.

But, of course, we ask, "When? When is he going to do that?" We hear, second half of verse 7: "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." Jesus will come to judge the world. And when he comes to judge the world, he will be like a flaming fire. You might remember from Malachi a couple weeks ago where he was described as "burning like an oven." And all the evil which is before him will be like stubble. Evil won't be able to stand against him, Christians, when he comes to judge the world in righteousness.

And more than this, verse 9: "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." They will receive their long deserved judgment. And that is good news for God's suffering people! To know that the evil which you

see around you today, Christians, the evil which seems so strong, the evil which seems to be getting away with everything that it's doing, the evil that is going even against God's church, that evil will fall, and God will bring it to an end. And he will judge the world, because he is not ignoring us. He is not deaf to our cries. He will give justice to his own people. So we can see then that Christ's return gives a purpose, a meaning to our suffering, because it shows us that it doesn't go on forever, that evil will end, and then we will go into a joy which will never come to an end.

But Paul goes on to say in 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." Now, notice what he says here: Christ will "be glorified in his saints" on that day. Your suffering glorifies God! Now, we might say, "Hold on a second. How does that possibly work? How can what we are going through glorify God? How can what we are suffering lead us to give thanks and praise to the Father?" First of all, because despite our crosses, despite the suffering we're going through, we continue. We endure. We persist. Against all odds in the eyes of the world, our suffering brings good rather than evil. And that's something that only God could do. But more than this, Christians, through our weakness, God shows his power. Because think of it this way. If we never suffered as a Christian, if we never had to endure anything for the sake of Christ, the world might say, "Well, why do you need God? Why does he do anything for you? You seem to be doing this by your own power." But we are fools, Christians, the fools of Christ, despised by the world, weak and out in the outskirts of the world. And yet despite our weakness, Christ still has the victory. And that is something that shows just how powerful he truly is. Because if he could use something so low in the eyes of the world to overcome the entire world, that is the power of God! And we will glorify him for that. Because on that day when we see him--we who believe--we will marvel at him. And then our suffering going to make sense, because we will be able to praise him for all the good that he has done for us in our lives, even if we can't see it right now.

This is why then Paul closes this section in verse 11: "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 the Lord Jesus Christ." So Paul prays, then, that God would make you worthy of the kingdom of heaven through the suffering, through the cross which he lays on us. Paul prays, then, that God would fulfill every good resolve that you have, so that you would be to stand in such suffering. And he says the result of all of this is so that Jesus would be glorified in you. That when the world sees us as weak as we are, and yet God still accomplishes such great things through us, Jesus will be glorified.

But also with this, Christian--and don't overlook this--you will be glorified in him. God isn't ignoring what we're going through. He is not just saying, "Well, that's over now. Let's just forget about it. I'm glad that's done." No, we are looking forward to glory, because God will reward us with a crown that will never pass away. As we hear in places like James, chapter 1, verse 12: "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him." So Christians, our suffering will lead to glory. And on that day when Jesus raises us up, he will give to us that crown as a reward for the things that we have gone through. A crown which will never fade. A

crown which will never be taken away. And he will glorify us forever according to his great mercy.

So Christians, don't fear suffering for the sake of Jesus. Don't try to just give in. Don't just go along to get along. Don't just ignore it. Don't fear suffering for the sake of Jesus. Because though this world and this time are very evil, it will come to an end. Jesus will return to judge all things. And when he does, our suffering will end. When he does, those who have afflicted us, those who have attacked us will receive their long deserved judgment. And we who have endured with him will receive the crown of everlasting glory. So stand up! Stand firm! Hold on to what you have been taught! Because your suffering is not in vain.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, though we are weak and despised in the world, yet you have made us strong in Jesus Christ. Strengthen us through all our trials and tribulations, so that through our suffering, we may be glorified with you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.