

Gospel Opposition

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[0 : 00] We're continuing in our sermon series in 1 Thessalonians. If you've got a Bible, go ahead and turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 2. If you are called by Jesus and you call Jesus your Lord and Savior, then by nature you are one who gets to share in his sufferings and must learn to live through it.

And all God's people said amen. All right, so 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 13, it says this, and we also thank God constantly for this, that when you, Thessalonian church, when you receive the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers.

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out.

And they displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. So as always to fill up the measure of their sins.

But wrath has come upon them at last. This is God's word. It's a bit of a tough one, huh? So years ago, I was 21 and me and a friend of mine, his dad had a condo down in Baja, California.

[1 : 56] So we took a trip down there for a vacation to hang out, have some fun. And one thing I noticed that always stuck out to me is when you land in Baja, they have this little tagline everywhere that says, no bad days, right?

And I'd have said yes and amen to that based on my experience there. It was sunny skies, no rain, dry heat. And you got to lounge around a pool. You got to be close to the beach and the ocean. You got to get on boats and go marlin fishing and different things like that.

It was kind of like endless summer vibes down in Baja, California. But as much as they would like to say, hey, come here, there's no bad days, it's not always the case. If you follow the news closely, they've had their fair share of earthquakes and tropical storms and hurricanes that have caused massive devastation.

And reading these verses, you know, if you were to just stop at verse 13 where Paul is, man, you guys were so thankful when we came to you, you received the word and man, you became just like us in every way.

And that sounds like following Jesus can be like Baja, California, no bad days. And then there's verse 14 and 15 and 16, right? But here's the thing for you and me to know in this is that even though we suffer, we have to realize this, Christians will share in the experience of suffering for the sake of the gospel.

[3 : 21] Now, I want to be clear about the kind of suffering Paul's talking about here. It's not the kind of suffering that's common to all mankind due to aging, illness, death, hunger, relational strife, FOMO, those kind of things.

And it's not suffering because of blowback because you did something stupid, right? It's the kind of persecution that comes your way when you believe in Jesus and live out your faith publicly.

That's what Paul's talking about very specifically here. And Paul talks about, you know, other places like, I think of Ephesians 4, 5. He talks about the things we have in common, the unity that we have as Christians, the things that we share in.

He says, hey, we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism. And maybe he should have added there, hey, there's one suffering too, right? For the gospel. But he doesn't do it there, but he does it somewhere else.

And he does it in 2 Corinthians 1, 3 to 6, where he talks about our common sufferings. He says this, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all

comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, right?

[4 : 29] Suffering word. That wind is just going to be like messing with my head. And I'm like, yeah, okay, I feel it. I feel it. Who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation.

If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we can endure.

I don't know about you, but I can't say I'm a big fan of sharing abundantly in Christ's sufferings.

That's not one of those things that like, I'm like, oh, yay, I get to wake up and do that every single day. I don't wake up and pray, Lord, bring me into my next affliction.

Are you guys like that? But suffering, affliction, isn't without its benefit. Now you may say, Jesse, you're losing it.

[5 : 43] But I would argue that it's not without its benefit. Because we have to acknowledge that there is a unique fellowship and bond that is created in shared suffering. My grandpa Vanderhoof, he was a World War II Navy veteran.

And the common experience he shared with other veterans of the war carried on past the war. It carried into his civilian life. And he would connect. Somehow, man, those veterans knew how to find each other.

And they knew how to connect. And they had this amazing bond. And he had a 6 a.m. prayer group that he went to every day when he was in retirement. They were all retired veterans.

They would meet early in the morning for prayer and for fellowship. And all you military veterans and active service folks in the room, you know what I'm talking about. You understand the bond that is created when you face opposition together.

And sometimes it's with people you may have not liked beforehand. But then afterwards, you're just like, no. There's a common bond. There's a common fellowship here.

[6 : 50] In the face of real opposition, we tend to let go of petty differences. We do. If you and I never live out our faith, we might not experience that kind of opposition.

Maybe that sounds good to you. But opposition tends to galvanize us around better priorities in our life. It just does. When you lose that, you tend toward a self-indulgent, self-referenced life.

You come to church for what you get out of it, right? What's in it for me? How does the church and what it offers to me, how is it benefiting me? Or you just tend to fellowship with those who are most like you. And so church can easily become a collection of affinity groups.

Like, man, I only hang out with millennials that have man buns, tattoos, and like to play pickleball. I mean, you can easily become like, as like, Alex is like, hey, man, you're just like getting a little too close to home there.

Or we, you know, I'm picking on millennials, but we can do that with any age group, any stage of life. We can just, you know, jettison off into these cul-de-sacs of like, oh, man, all these people are like me, so I want to do that.

[8 : 02] There has to be something of a gospel affinity that brings us together despite our differences in age and stage of life or gender or ethnicity.

Otherwise, what kind of power does it really have compared to how the world out there collects together and groups together? Paul's argument is that he is convinced the Thessalonians have really believed and appropriated the gospel of Jesus because they experienced the same opposition and they held fast.

They held fast to that gospel. Think about this for us today. When we live out the gospel, we, you and I, you and I will end up having more in common with each other, but we will also have more in common with a Christian in Russia than our unbelieving neighbor down the street who looks like us, votes like us, and even has the same lawn signs as we do.

It's probably why it's really good to get out there and do some international mission trips. Just see what the rest of the world is like. Get with other believers around the world. See what they're facing. See what you have in common with them.

Enlarge your scope. Enlarge your world and your worldview, your perspective. It's good for you to see what God is doing all over the world and other places. We have a lot more in common with our brothers and sisters in different contexts than we realize.

[9 : 31] So be encouraged and be comforted by the truth that suffering for the gospel builds fellowship and intimacy with God and other Christian brothers and sisters.

Now, you might say, man, Jess, when you put it that way, suddenly it really doesn't sound so bad. Paul isn't that crazy after all. But then we still got to reckon with some of the other stuff Paul says here.

14b, second half of verse 14. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out and displeased God and opposed all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles, that they might be saved.

So always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last. This kind of language makes us uncomfortable. You might wonder, like, man, Paul, what's going on?

But I want to challenge you. This is a soundbite in comparison to everything Paul wrote about opponents to the gospel and even his fellow countrymen, the Jews.

[10 : 43] And so you and I, we have to take in the full scope of his work to understand the point that he is making here and also to understand the point he is not making.

This isn't an excuse for us to walk away. The takeaway isn't to mistreat people opposed to the gospel. And it is not an excuse for anti-Semitism. And having said that, Paul does give us room to recognize a true reality, that there is gospel opposition.

It is okay to notice and name gospel opposition for what it is. It's okay to do that, and it's okay to call it evil. Today, in places like Sudan and Nigeria, Christians have suffered quietly for years now.

It doesn't make the news. And just in Nigeria, over the past 10 years, the estimates of those killed just for being Christian range from, like, 30,000 on the low end and up to 70,000 on the high end.

And that's just accounting the martyrs. That's not accounting for other acts of violence and injustice against Nigerian Christians over that period of time. And that aggressive kind of affliction is what we might call hard persecution, right, today.

[11 : 58] But then there's other places where Christians aren't necessarily getting killed at all, but the gospel isn't gaining any kind of traction there either. In America, Christianity seems to be on the decline.

Church attendance is down. Faith and historic orthodoxy within its churches is down and within believers is down. Our beliefs, those who hold to the beliefs of the traditional marriage and sexual ethics that we have from the Bible, it's now very apparent we are on the wrong side of the mainstream in the public square.

What the church is facing in the West is what you would call soft opposition to the gospel. But noticing hard and soft opposition isn't a bad thing.

It's actually a good thing. It's okay to name it. And calling it evil is also wise lest we drift into calling it good. But then here's the thing.

That's fine, but what do we do about it? This is where Christians have the opportunity to really stand out. You and I, we can call gospel opposition as it is.

[13 : 03] We can call it evil without getting worked up into a lather. How do we do that? Well, we do it by bringing it to God in the way Paul does in verses 15 to 16. He laments the evil.

He entrusts justice to God so that he can love his opponents. Years ago, a close friend of mine told me a story.

He had some family friends and the daughter of their family friend was assaulted by her boyfriend. And instead of bringing it to the proper authorities to deal with, his son went out and assaulted that man and ended up in jail for a couple of years.

But he justified it and he said, well, he had to do the Lord's work. That sentiment feels so right to us. That kind of like vengeance feels so right to us.

But that is self-righteous deception. Jesus doesn't call his church to dole out justice like that. So then the question remains, how are we called to respond to those who mistreat us and oppose the gospel for the sake of the gospel?

[14 : 11] It is okay to feel sadness and anger over those things. It is okay to feel sadness and anger because of evil. But you and I, we need to release those frustrations, bring them to the Lord, bring it to him in prayer.

Even better, do it while you're with other Christians. Mourning in community, mourning about suffering for the gospel is a community thing and it's beautiful and it can fill your soul with peace

and courage.

And it can remind you that you're not alone. And lamenting, what lamenting is, it is being sad and angry with God. In believing that God sees what is happening to you, he sees it and he cares about it.

And Paul connects the Thessalonian Christians being persecuted by their fellow countrymen, the Gentiles in Thessalonica. He connects it with how the Judean Christians had persecuted the Christians there.

Or the Judean Christians being persecuted by their fellow countrymen. And he calls out the evil, he said, man, they killed Jesus. They drove us out by persecution. And now, everywhere we go, I go into a Greco-Roman city and I try to find the Jews and I preach the gospel to them first.

[15 : 29] But everywhere we go, the Jews, some don't, but some do, try to oppose the gospel. And they try to keep us from preaching salvation to the Gentiles. And then he makes this statement, he did that to the prophets too.

So now he's going back further into history. Mentioning the prophets of old and why would he do that? Well, the takeaway isn't trying to get the church to say, hey, guess what guys, the Jews are your enemies.

They always will be. He's saying, look, in every generation, in every place, those who are faithful to God have experienced opposition. Just like you guys are now.

That's it. But also he's saying, don't take vengeance because God is the one measuring their sins so you don't need to. And the takeaway here is lament and name the evil but entrust justice to God.

That is what Paul is trying to get across to you and me. See, God, he works across generations.

We, you and me, we want immediate satisfaction.

[16 : 31] We want immediate satisfaction for any injustice that comes up against us. We want to see the wrongs corrected. But what holds Christians fast in suffering is this truth.

That justice will happen in God's time, not ours. Think about that. Justice will happen, but it's going to happen in God's time, not ours. Paul talks about them, the Jews, his fellow countrymen, filling up their measure of sin.

Which is really a reference to Genesis 15, 16. And Genesis 15, 16, Paul is, or not Paul, but God is talking to Abraham. Right? And he's telling Abraham, Abraham, here's my big plan.

Right? I'm going to give you some of the kind of the high level points here. Your descendants are going to be enslaved in a foreign land. We know that to be Egypt when it happened.

But they're going to be enslaved there and they're going to be there for 400 years. And then they're going to come back out. And I'm going to bring them back into this land that I promised you,

Canaan land. And here is God's reasoning for doing that way.

[17 : 34] 400 years, God's calling his shot like Babe Ruth. Verse 16 says, They shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

See, God's wrath isn't like ours. It's slow. God takes his time. And you know why he takes his time? Because he is merciful.

N.T. Wright, he talks about Paul's use of God's wrath here in 1 Thessalonians 2, 16. And he says, man, Paul's use here is really informed by his understanding of Scripture and what he knows from Scripture of who God is.

And he says, behind Paul's words is not a vindictiveness, but actually a redemptive hope. See, God's anger is never capricious or malevolent. When humans reject him and behave in ways that undermine his wise and generous designs for them in the world, he does not instantly punish, but allows space for repentance.

And if this does not happen, though, wickedness builds up. Sin accumulates until the point where God must say enough and brings things to an end.

[18 : 50] This is what Paul's talking about here, the measure of their sins. He's informed. He's understanding this. And he's entrusting this justice to God. And that's what it looks like for you and me to do the same thing, entrusting justice to God, which we have to do to avoid getting ahead of God and his ways.

And also, we need to do that to avoid having an us versus them perspective to start calcifying in our hearts, because you know what? That just tends toward evil. When we start to see our opponents as them, our enemies, who must be stopped and taken out at any point, it tends toward evil.

We will do things. We will return evil for evil, which we are not called to do. However, when you and I practice lamenting, we practice entrusting justice to God, it opens us up to be able to love those opposed to us, all the while not having to sanctify their sinfulness.

But we can still love them, though they are opposed to us, and opposed to the gospel specifically. And one of the ways that helps us to love those who oppose the gospel is to notice and name their redemptive qualities.

We love our gospel opponents by noticing and giving praise to what is praiseworthy. Where can we find redemptive common ground in our modern moment?

[20 : 14] We should be able to. Where can we find redemptive common ground with those who seem antagonistic to the gospel? We should be able to.

But to do that, you and I, we need to first get a proper theology into our hearts and be convinced of this. And a theology around man and sin, the Bible says that everybody, every person are God's image bearers.

But sin's corrupted that. It's shattered that. But here's the good news. The Bible doesn't say we are sinful to the uttermost. We aren't as evil and anti-God as we can possibly be, because there's this thing called common grace.

And God's common grace is that he limits that. He limits the depths of our sinfulness. And that means that mankind still has some sense of morality and justice, even if it's inconsistent and far below God's standards.

We also find common grace in what human beings can do. We make art and music and scientific advancements and medicine, and we have this desire to be loved.

[21 : 21] Those are all things that point to the image of God and the likeness of God in us. And so you and me, we have to understand that everybody, even our opponents, we are imperfect image bearers.

And you know what? Sometimes we have to look hard to find that image bearing. But if you want to follow the way of Jesus and love your enemies, you have to spend more energy looking for what's praiseworthy than growing bitter over their obvious sin.

That's what Paul did on Mars Hill in Athens. Look at, he's there to spread the gospel. And he says this in Acts 17, 23, I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, and I found also an altar with this inscription, to the unknown God.

And therefore, what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. And he goes on to proclaim this unknown God that they were wondering about, and he points it to Jesus. Paul found something redemptive in secular pagan idol worship in the Greco-Roman world.

That is looking for, that's looking hard. Here's the thing. When we spend time finding common ground in what is praiseworthy, you know what it does?

[22 : 37] It softens our hearts towards our opponents, but it also softens our opponents' hearts towards the gospel. Every culture and generation will easily say amen to parts of the gospel.

But then there's other parts that they will almost, they will look at the gospel, and it will almost seem evil to them. Right? There's some parts that are going to say amen to that, and there's some parts that are going to say like, oh, no, I don't think so.

But you know what? They still need to hear the gospel, and we still need to reckon with that. Elliot actually passed on some of these thoughts about like, hey, different times and different places where cultures that say amen to some gospel things and oh, no, to some other gospel things.

And think of the Greco-Roman world. Like the things that they would say amen to, gospel virtues, were like order and wisdom and justice. Right? And in some circles to honoring the, like we just talked about what Paul was doing, the unseen powers, the unknown God.

But the oh, no's, the thing that would have been like, whoa, whoa, whoa, we're not cool with this, is to any challenge to the Roman state. Because Rome was the light in the darkness. It was bringing the light of goodness and justice and righteousness to this evil, dark world.

[23 : 51] And therefore, any challenge to Rome by any kingdom, not of this world, was not okay. Or oh, no, to the worship of just one God. Or oh, no, they wouldn't have been okay to the challenge of the sexual ethic.

They were promiscuous. And it was permitted and it was pervasive in that culture. They would have said, oh, no, to the elevating the worth of people like women and slaves.

That's what the gospel was doing in that time. That was the confrontation of the gospel and some of the opposition it was facing. You can move on to other times like the Viking era. The Vikings, I mean, they were brutal in a lot of ways.

But you know what? They would have said yes and amen to, and they did as missionaries came to them centuries ago. They said amen to ideas, gospel ideas like justice and honor.

Amen to ideas like judgment for those who do wicked things. Amen to bravery and loyalty. But things like mercy, they would have been like, I don't get it. No, that's bad.

[24 : 53] Turning the other cheek, that's stupid. Why would you do that? But Jesus, there's a guy being punished in our place for the things we did wrong? No, no, no, that's not good.

That's not right. Being a people of peace, that was considered weakness in that culture. Or the idea that they were even made in the image of God and being able to choose.

They were people that believed they were just controlled by the fates. And then you can move on from the Viking era to the Enlightenment era. In the Enlightenment era, man, the gospel amens were, man, they sought truth and beauty.

Those are like gospel things. They evolved on ideas of ethics and morality, which are so close and informed to those things in the Bible. God, but God is the source of truth and not science and reason.

And that was like, mm, can't go there. Jesus is Savior as opposed through human enlightenment and education and progress.

[25 : 58] Then there's our modern era, the time we live in today. Man, we love mercy and grace and forgiveness today. Man, those are redemptive things in common grounds. We could say that our culture says yes and amen to, that we can recognize and be like, that's good.

Liberty. Love our liberty. Man, the liberty in Christ the gospel proclaims. Man, seeing the image of God in all people.

Those are good things. But there's other things today that they say no, no, no to you. Challenges. Anything that challenges our sexual desire and sexual fulfillment.

Not okay with. Anything that rejects ourselves as the highest authority. Hyper-individualism of today. What this means is that no matter your time, no matter your prevailing culture, no matter your country, your political party, city, friend group, wherever you have lived, wherever you might find yourself, if you are faithful to the gospel, like I said, you're going to eventually come into conflict with something that that group or that society holds dear.

And even, even if it is 95% in flow with the gospel, in line with the gospel, eventually you're, you're going to have to challenge that 5%.

[27 : 20] That 5% that isn't. And you know what? When you do that, you're likely going to lose some influence. You're going to lose some favor because of it.

So for the sake of the gospel, it is good for us to find common ground. Where the culture or the people are saying amen to those gospel virtues.

And at the same time, for the sake of the gospel, we have to push back. And I want to say push back peacefully. Push back with grace and truth. Where the culture is saying no to the gospel.

And that will mean suffering. And we might ask the question, well, why should we do that if it just means we are going to suffer for it? And we suffer and we hold fast to the gospel because we do that with the hope that enemies will become family.

It's important to not let gospel opposition turn into hate for those from whom the opposition comes from. The same Paul that writes these words about the opposition of the Jews in 1 Thessalonians, he also wrote Romans 9.

[28 : 23] In Romans 9, he talks about his fellow countrymen, his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters. And he says, oh, I would rather be cut off.

I would trade places with them. only if they could come to know this Jesus that I believe in. And would have faith in him and be saved. That was his desire for his fellow countrymen.

And if we don't do that, if we don't have that desire, we can fall into the mistake of being bitter and being prejudiced.

That was Luther's mistake. He let stubborn opposition to the gospel from the Jewish community in his day just turn into despising them. And it came out in his writings. It was terrible.

It was terrible. He said some very vile things towards that people group. There's still a temptation in us today, friends, to move from sorrow over gospel opposition to despising those from whom it

comes.

[29 : 24] Even as Jesus longs to draw those same people to himself. And the question I want to kind of leave us with today is think about this for yourself. For yourself.

What people group? Or what political tribe? Or what social class? Do you need to step back and rethink, have I been hating them?

Or have I been desiring and hoping and praying for God's salvation over them? As the band comes up and we look to respond, in a moment we're going to take communion.

This communion we're going to take is a stark reminder that Jesus came to save his enemies by living with them. He moved into the neighborhood. He walked among us.

He ate with us. He taught. He healed. He cast out demons. And ultimately he came to suffer and die in our place.

[30 : 27] To save his enemies from the wrath of God that is coming. That's what he did. So what's our hope? What is your hope? I want to say to you, if you're not yet a follower of Jesus, your hope isn't to get your act together, to be more righteous than the person next to you, your neighbor.

Your only hope is Jesus. Your hope isn't to defeat your enemies. Your only hope is Jesus.

Surrender to him.

Be saved from the wrath that is to come. Jesus took that wrath upon himself for you. There's going to be a prayer on the screen for you to pray, if that's you today.

And I urge you to pray that prayer. Now, if you're here and you're already a follower of Jesus, same response to that question.

What is our hope? Jesus is our only hope. Not me. Not being in the right church. Jesus is our only hope.

[31 : 45] Both to save us from the wrath to come and to change our hearts, to handle gospel opposition like he would. So when we come to this meal today, I want you to think about Jesus' suffering for your salvation.

And I want you to be reminded that we never suffer alone. We're not called to the table by ourselves. We're called to come with the rest of the body of believers in the room.

We don't suffer alone. And as we suffer for the gospel, we have this privilege of knowing and sharing in Christ's suffering. And it creates a unique fellowship, a particular fellowship, an intimacy with God and with Jesus and with his people that we could not know otherwise.

But here's the good news. Just as we share in his sufferings, we also get to share in his comforts.

You and I, we are those who suffer for the glorious cause of the gospel, which is this, while we were still sinners, while we were enemies of God, Jesus came and died for us to make us family.

And he uses our gospel suffering for that same end to turn enemies into family. Pray with me.

Father, we come to you. This is not an easy topic.

[32 : 56] It's not a fun topic. But it's one we need to know. It's one we need to get right. Because when we get it wrong, our witness suffers badly. And we want to be a people.

We want to be a church. We want to be a community that bears witness to you. Lord, we are hungry to know you and to know you more.

Lord, the scary thing is the answer to that prayer sometimes is that you're going to bring us into suffering so we can understand and know our Savior better. And so with a big gulp in our throat, we say, please answer that prayer.

And help us to suffer well. Lord, we pray for the sake of the gospel. And now we come to your table. Your body broken, your blood shed for us.

And we're reminded of what you did for us and your sufferings. This is a moment where you get to share in your sufferings and also share in your comforts. And pray you would make, speak to our souls in ways that go beyond words.

[34 : 20] As we do this, pray this in your name. Amen. Amen.