

Hardships and Persecution

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[0 : 00] Let me ask you this morning, what are your passions in life? What are your passions in life? If I had to ask one of your friends, what are your passions, what would they say?

Passion, as you know, it's an interesting word. It means, the way we use it today, it means an intense feeling for something, a tense desire. So, we talk about a passionate embrace, or passionate kiss, or even a passionate hatred.

So, any kind of intense feeling, that's how we use the word passion. It's used often in advertising. In fact, weirdly enough, in car adverts, you tend to see that word passion a lot.

Land Rover is driven by passion, they use that word. Alfa Romeo is your passport to passion.

Passion. The original meaning of the word passion means something slightly different, actually.

I wonder if you know that the word passion actually means suffering in the original. It comes from the Latin pati, which means suffering or pain.

[1 : 08] That's why we see it, for example, in the word compassionate. That means suffering with. Com is with passion, suffer. The passion of Christ. At Easter, we talk about the passion of Christ.

We talk about the suffering of Christ. It certainly puts a different spin on those car ads. Suddenly, Land Rover becomes driven by suffering. I wonder, Adrian, if that's your experience as a Land Rover driver.

Alfa Romeo, your passport to pain. But if you take that deeper meaning of the word passion, then it really does cause you to ask, well, what is your passion?

What are you willing to endure pain to achieve in your life? That's really what passion is. If you take the full meaning, it's an intense desire that you're willing to suffer for, to achieve.

Or you're willing to make sacrifices for. What is your passion? Well, this passage we have in front of us is a very important one in the Bible.

[2 : 08] Because it, more than any other passage, I think, shows us what the Apostle Paul's passion in his life really is. It's here in this passage in 1 Thessalonians 3 that he, more than I think any other passage in any of his writings in the Bible, really wears his heart on his sleeve and he shows us what's really on his heart.

And that's why it's here. Because it gives us an exposure of the heart of a true disciple of Christ.

And I think what it does, as we look at it this morning, is that it challenges us to evaluate our own passions as Christians and see how much they line up with the Apostle Paul's passion.

And as we look at this, and I hope that you have it open in front of you as we read through it together, it doesn't take long for us to realize what the Apostle Paul's passion really was.

Let's have a look, for example, at verse 7 to 10 of chapter 3. He says, Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and affliction, we were encouraged about you through your faith.

For now we live if you stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you?

[3 : 36] As we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith. You see his passion coming through there. You see his emotion, his raw emotion.

And what we realize as we read this passage is that Paul's passion, more than anything else, was the faith of other people in Christ.

Paul's passion was the faith of others. That was his overriding priority. It was to him, as you read, not just in Thessalonians, but the rest of the letters as well, in the book of Acts where we recount his exploits in the Mediterranean world.

You just see that to him, to Paul, the only thing that was important was that other people come to faith in Jesus Christ. Ever since he encountered the resurrected living Lord Jesus Christ, ever since

that moment, his overriding passion in life is for other people to know Christ and to have faith in Christ.

You see in the book of Acts, for example, as you look at how he went about on his mission, his passion for other people's faith in Christ was more important even than his own safety or his own comfort.

[4 : 53] In fact, you've seen that already in 1 Thessalonians. If you just go back to last week's passage, chapter 2, verse 2, he says, After we had previously suffered and retreated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you in spite of great opposition.

So he knew he was going to suffer for taking the gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth of who Jesus is, to the Thessalonians. But that didn't matter because to him, the faith, them coming to know Jesus, the faith in Jesus was far more important to him than his own life.

And we see that throughout the New Testament. But it's here in this passage that he tells us why. It tells us why he's so passionate for the faith of others.

And it's a simple reason. It's because Jesus is coming back. That's the overriding thought in this whole passage. You see it actually at the beginning and at the end of this morning's passage.

Have a look at verse 19 of chapter 2. For who is our hope, our joy, our crown of boasting, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?

[6 : 01] So that's the overriding thought. And it runs through right till the end of this passage.

Chapter 3, verse 13. He says, he's praying for the Thessalonians. He says, may he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

You see how that thought is just always in his mind. And everything he says about everything else is guided by and dictated by that overarching thought that Jesus is coming back.

When that day that the Old Testament we saw in our Isaiah passage speaks about. When the Lord, the Son of God, the Lord of this world, the Messiah, returns to judge sin once and for all.

To end all remaining opposition to God. To bring about God's plans for this world. And to save from this and all those who are waiting for him.

That day that's coming in our future was Paul's overriding perspective that drove him forward in life and dictated every decision he made.

[7 : 06] From verse 19 of chapter 2 again. Look what he says. For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming?

Is it not you? Indeed you are our glory and our joy. Talking to the Thessalonians. In other words, what he's saying to them is, what really matters for us in life is not riches or popularity, but only what we've done to help you get ready for the day Jesus is coming back.

To him, that's the only thing that actually matters. Anything he's done in his life to help other people get ready for Jesus coming back. And that's why he's so pained in verse 5 of chapter 3 here.

He's so pained at the thought of the Thessalonians falling away from faith in Christ. Do you see that? Have a look at verse 5. For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent Timothy to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labor might be for nothing.

He's so concerned about the Thessalonians' faith. Even after he's gone there and he's shared the gospel with them and he's moved on out of necessity, the whole time he's been thinking about the Thessalonians, going, how are they doing?

[8 : 35] Worried about their faith in the Lord. An apostolic concern, anxiety. Not an unjustified one, but a justified concern for their faith.

In fact, he was more concerned for their faith than their physical well-being. And we see that as well in this passage. He expected them to go through persecution. In fact, he brought it upon them, right?

He could have just bypassed Thessalonica and the Thessalonians would have been none the wiser and they wouldn't have been persecuted. But no, he knew they needed to hear the gospel and he also knew that would cause them trouble when they became Christians.

And those who believed the gospel were converted and started following Christ as their king. He knew that would cause them a world of trouble, but that didn't stop him. He says in verse 4 here, have a look.

In fact, when we were with you, we told you in advance that we were going to experience affliction. And as you know, it happened. And so he totally expected that he and those who become disciples of Christ will go through persecution.

[9 : 41] And even though he loved these Thessalonians, notice, importantly, what was unbearable for Paul was not the thought that they were suffering, but the thought that their faith may be failing because of their suffering.

You see that? The thought that they might not be ready for Jesus when he comes back was the most unbearable thought for Paul. Let's bring this home to our own lives.

Let me ask you, what would concern you more? Getting a message that your friend has been in a car accident or getting a message that your friend hasn't been to church in a while?

I think for most of us, the first message would concern us more, right? We'd be much more concerned if we heard that our friend was in physical danger than we would be if they weren't coming to church in a while, i.e. they were in spiritual danger.

But for Paul, it's different. Do you notice that? For Paul, far more unbearable than his friends being in danger is the idea of his friends being unprepared for Christ when he returns. And that should be for us as well as disciples of Christ.

[10 : 58] See, we need to learn, like Paul, I think that this is what this passage challenges us to do. To learn to make the return of Jesus Christ.

If we're Christians and we believe that he's coming back, we should make the return of Christ as central in our thinking as it was in Paul's day to day.

So much so that our passions start to reflect Paul's passions. And that the faith of others becomes our overriding priority in our lives too.

That when we wake up and when we go about our day, we're not thinking first and foremost of, you know, how are we going to get money and how are we going to advance our career and how are we going to pass these exams.

But first and foremost, we think of those things. But first, before all those things, we think about the people that God has put into our lives, our work colleagues, our family, our friends, and our overriding priorities that they come to know Christ.

[12 : 05] That is what it was for Paul and he's given here as an example for us too. And that should be especially the overriding priority of parents for their children, for example.

Let me just take a few minutes to speak especially to parents right now. What's more important for you, parents?

That your child is ready for university or that they're ready for the return of Jesus Christ? Now, of course, you'll say, well, of course, that they're ready for Jesus.

But the truth of that will be seen in how much you model priority of church over other things on Sunday. You can't really say, well, my child's faith is my absolute priority, but then parent them in such a way that says there are more important things than church on a Sunday, like studying for your exams or going to your sports competition.

See, we need to learn to see our children in light of the return of Christ above all other things as well, to parent them properly. If you want to parent your child properly, if you want the top parenting tip, it's parent them in light of the return of Christ every day.

[13 : 22] Because on that day, their trophies and their exam results will mean nothing. All that will matter is that they are standing firm in Christ. Are you parenting them for that day?

Because that was Paul's priority for all the people in his life, to establish others in faith in Christ. That's what we see here in this passage.

But there's another thing we learn in this passage. We learn how people's faith is actually established. He goes on to tell us, to teach us, in what he says to these Thessalonians, we learn how their faith was going to be established.

And what we discover is the important truth that being established in the faith is more than just believing in Jesus. Have a look at some of these verses.

Verse 2 of chapter 3. He says, We sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker, in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.

[14 : 25] That word strengthen is actually, originally the word is establish. They knew the gospel, right? When Paul and Timothy and Silas were with them the first time, they had heard the gospel of Jesus, they had believed in it, they had come to faith, they had been baptized.

But then Paul still sees it necessary to send Timothy to establish their faith. It's more than just believing in Christ. You see it again. Verse 7. Have a look. He says, Verse 7, Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and affliction, we were encouraged about you through your faith. They already had faith. But, go down to verse 10. What does he say? We pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith. They already had faith, and yet, there was more to be done. You see that? Being established in the faith is far more than just believing in Christ. One of the, I think, most common illustrations in the Bible for faith and how faith grows and develops, which Paul uses, Jesus uses, is the idea of a plant growing, a seed being put in the ground and then a plant coming up. And, you know, if you've ever done any gardening or planting of seeds, that planting the seed is only the first step. You don't just plant the seed and forget about it. [15:48] You've got to water it. And as it sprouts and grows, you've got to make sure it gets enough sunlight and continued water. And then as it gets bigger, the plant, you've got to prune it to make sure it grows healthily.

Well, the same goes for faith. We need to understand that as Christians, that our faith and the faith of others, it's not just a matter of believing in Christ. It's a, you can't just, when we share the gospel as well, we can't just drop and run, which is a very popular, you know, habit of sharing the gospel. Just, you know, here's the gospel, believe in Christ, pray this prayer, now you're a Christian, yay, move on to the next one. That's not how it works. Conversion is a process that continues. We need to be more and more established in the faith and we need to help others be more and more established in the faith. And you, now this is the surprise that we also see in this passage, you sitting in the pew or sitting at home have a role to establish other people in the faith. Not just me. God gives you a role to play in establishing the faith of others by providing them with two ingredients that we see in this passage as well.

[17:03] There's two primary ingredients that we learn are necessary for the establishing of the faith which you are called to provide. The first ingredient is Christian relationships.

Did you notice how much Christian relationships forms also Paul's thinking here? He says, Timothy will only establish them in the faith of Thessalonians when he goes to them.

Paul, multiple times in this passage, stresses how he wants to go back. He wants to continue his relationship with the Thessalonians. He wants to see them. Look at verse 6 at the end of it.

You long to see us as we also long to see you. Verse 10, he says, we pray earnestly night and day to see you face to face and complete what is lacking in your faith.

Paul wants to see them face to face to build them in the faith because he realizes they need more than just his letters. They need more than just Paul's letters to grow in the faith.

[18:08] What they need more than just the words that he writes to them is his life. Real examples of Christian living in him and Timothy and Silas. The Thessalonians, especially such young Christians, they were only like a few weeks or maybe months into their Christianity.

They needed to see how Christians live and act and think and speak. They needed examples. They needed to get to know other Christians to see how the gospel works practically in life.

Christian living is actually like learning a language in a way. You know, if you want to learn a language, a new language, what you soon discover is that learning remotely or just by looking at YouTube lessons on this language or just taking a course, will never be enough to actually fully learn a language.

You need interaction with native speakers of that language to know how to converse and how to use that language in context, right? That's why children learn their first language so well because they internalize it because they see it being used by their parents and their siblings every day.

Well, the same goes with learning the gospel. It's not just a matter of getting lessons and sermons, important as those are. You need to see the gospel work out in daily life and you only do that when you spend time with other Christians who believe the gospel and live by it.

[19:45] people and the Bible affirms this over and over again. You know, we in our denomination and our church rightly make a big focus on teaching the word but this passage has convicted me and I hope it convicts you too that teaching the word, you sitting in the pew learning the word, you sitting at home watching YouTube learning the word is never enough.

It's vital, it's necessary but it's never enough. You need Christian relationships too and the Bible affirms this over and over again. Just one example. You can turn with me, keep your finger in 1

Thessalonians, turn forward to Hebrews chapter 10.

It's a well-known verse. I read it again and I think it's a verse we especially need to hear in COVID and with all these difficulties of gathering that we have.

Hebrews 10:24-25. He says, let us watch out for one another to provoke love and good works or to spur each other on to love and good works not neglecting to gather together as some are in the habit of doing but encouraging each other and all the more as you see the day approaching.

You see the writer to the Hebrews had that same priority, that same thought in mind. The return of Jesus Christ is what makes it necessary for us to not just sit by ourselves in our own separate lives but gather together so we can spur each other on and prepare each other for the return of Christ because we need each other so that we can learn by spending time with other Christians we can learn how to live out the gospel by observing those who maybe are further down the road than we are and seeing their lives and being involved in their lives and helping others who maybe are newer Christians than we are you would be surprised how much if you've been a Christian for any length of time how much your life is very different to the world around us and how that can serve more than you think as an example to new Christians of how to live the Christian life and what the gospel really looks like in life.

[22:02] Wherever you are actually on the journey of faith wherever you are maybe right at the beginning maybe way down the road you can benefit and benefit others from intentionally pursuing Christian relationships you can be spurred on by other Christians even Christians who have not been Christians for as long as you sometimes you need reminding and you need to absorb their passion maybe you've been a Christian for many years and actually you're slipping and you're losing your passion for Christ that's when you need to see and spend time with Christians that you can you know get that passion again and you can help them with what you've learnt and you can give them an example of Christian living it's so important the Bible makes such a stress on this that I don't think in our individualistic Western culture that we that we realize we need reminding of this but you know what

Satan knows this too Satan is totally aware of how much you need other Christian relationships in your life and he will do everything he can to try to stop that look back at 1 Thessalonians 2:18 look what Paul says so we wanted to come to you even I Paul time and time again but Satan hindered us Paul wanted to go back to the Thessalonians to establish them in the faith in the faith face to face and Satan spotted and said I can't let that happen because I know how important that is for the Thessalonians Satan hindered us you know I think Satan is loving the coronavirus Christians sitting at home separated from one another not being able to spur each other on and encourage each other in the faith because he knows that just getting this information is not enough he knows that and so he will do whatever he can to keep you from relationships with other Christians by making your life too busy to meet up with him by making them irritate you so much that you don't want to spend time with them by doing whatever he can to keep you away from other Christians don't let him that's why we've really got to be intentional in using any opportunities we have to develop relationships with each other you know that's why we have women's events and men's events and social events less so now in COVID but hopefully we can get back into doing those things on a regular basis and when that happens when you see those when the leader stands here and tells you about events or one of the women's committee says you know we're doing this take advantage of that not just for what you can get out of it but for an opportunity to develop strong Christian relationships by which you can disciple others you know that's how we should look at developing relationships as Christians it's not just oh I'll go to that if I think I can get something out of it or if someone else is going who I like or who I have something in common with that's not how it works that's not how it's supposed to work we as Christians are called to intentionally look for opportunities to develop discipling relationships with other Christians and to disciple another Christian it's not hard you don't have to be a trained Bible teacher that's my job that's Dylan's job your job is just to just pursue relationship we're relational beings we're made for relationship our kind of culture might not promote relationship as much as it should but we should pursue relationship and then it's just a matter of going hey do you want to meet for some coffee read the Bible together and pray it's really not that hard to encourage and spur on other Christians but we've got to make we've got to make that step of intentionally looking to develop those relationships so that's the first ingredient that each of us are involved in or called to be involved in in order to help establish the faith of others the second ingredient that we see in this passage is prayer look at how

Paul ends from verse 9 how can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you as we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and complete what is lacking in your faith and then he ends with a model prayer to show the Thessalonians what he's praying for them have a look from verse 11 now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you and may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone just as we do for you may he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones

Amen you see if we are prioritizing in our lives the faith of others in light of the day that Jesus is coming back we will be like Paul earnestly praying we'll be praying prayers of thanksgiving when we see people growing in faith because we have genuine joy for people's growth in the faith verse 9 how can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you genuine joyful thanksgiving in prayer but also focused prayer for the continued growth of these people that are in our lives these Christians that God has put in our local church and in our lives focused prayer for them that they would continue to grow in Christian living verse 12 to 13 and may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love and verse 13 may he make your hearts blameless in holiness we pray many things don't we as Christians well I hope we do what do your prayers consist of your daily prayers they'll consist of

Lord please protect me and my family please help me grow in my faith Lord please help me with you know the bills this month to make sure I've got enough money to pay them provide our daily needs all good things to pray but how much are we praying for the love and the holiness of our brothers and sisters that's the model that Paul gives us here to pray for the faith and the sanctification of our brothers and sisters in Christ I would encourage you to use 1 Thessalonians 3 11 to 13 as a model prayer for those in your life for your Christian brothers and sisters Lord direct my way to that person help me to find some time to really invest in their life Lord would you increase and overflow their love and my love for them and the love of the people of St. Mark for one another [29 : 39] Lord would you cause that person to grow in holiness and be ready for the return of Jesus Christ those kind of prayers we should be praying for one another that's the model Paul gives us here as we seek to develop Paul's overriding priority in our own lives which this passage challenges us to do which is a genuine passion for the faith of other people and that we would then each play our roles in growing and establishing the faith of the Christians that God has put in our life through intentional Christian relationships and constant Christian prayer well shall we pray now in response to that Lord we thank you for the apostle Paul and just what a conversion story that is that he was a persecutor of Christians and yet after meeting you face to face wow what a change he became a man who is a model for us who saw everything his whole life just in terms of your return to earth

Lord Jesus and his priorities for the faith of others overrode everything else Lord would you help us to develop those same priorities in our lives and as a church would you help us to spur each other on and prepare each other for your return in Jesus name we pray Amen