

Henry Ow  
 HCC Sermon  
 1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

## INTRODUCTION

1. Image: A successful bridge needed to withstand as much weight as possible
2. Need: Success depends on the ability to withstand hardship.
3. Subject: A church flourishes when it endures hardship to advance the gospel.
4. Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5
5. Preview:
  - a. Why does a successful church need to endure hardship?
  - b. What does gospel ministry care about?
  - c. Who does faithful gospel ministry reach?

## BODY

- I. Hardship often accompanies gospel work (3:1-5)
  - A. Paul sent Timothy to remind the Thessalonians to endure hardship in gospel work (3:1-5)
    1. Paul sends Timothy because of his faithfulness (3:1-2a)
    2. Timothy prepared the Thessalonians to endure when hardships came (3:2b-3a)
    3. Paul taught the Thessalonians to expect hardships (3:3b-4)
    4. If the Thessalonians failed to withstand hardship, then Paul's ministry failed (3:5)
  - B. Prepare yourself for the hardships of gospel ministry.
    1. Prepare yourself for misunderstanding as you teach the gospel to unbelievers.
    2. Prepare yourself for ridicule when you explain the gospel
- II. Gospel work cares about the spiritual well-being of people (2:17-20)  
 work of caring for people"
  - A. Paul cared for the Thessalonians because they represented his joy (2:17-20).
    1. Paul longed to see the Thessalonians because he cared for them (2:17-18a)
    2. Satan hindered Paul's return (2:18b)
    3. The spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians represented Paul's reward before Christ (2:19-20).
  - B. Care about the spiritual well-being of people
    1. We measure the success of gospel ministry according to the wrong standards
      - a. We measure our gospel ministry according to the number that attend service.
      - b. We measure our gospel ministry according to the size of our facility.
    2. God measures the success of gospel ministry according to how we cared for the spiritual welfare of people.
- III. Faithful gospel work reaches all people (2:13-16)

- A. Paul commends the Thessalonians for their work to reach all people in spite of the hardships (2:13-16)
  - 1. Paul gives thanks for the work of the word of God in the Thessalonians (2:13)
  - 2. Paul equates the suffering of the Thessalonians to the Judean church (2:14a)
  - 3. The Thessalonians preached the gospel to all led to their suffering (2:14b-16)
- B. Think about how we can work together as a church to reach all people.
  - 1. Reach all age groups.
  - 2. Reach all socio-economic classes.
  - 3. Reach all ethnicities (domestic and international)

#### CONCLUSION

- 1. Summary: A characteristic of a successful church is its ability to endure hardship as it does faithful gospel ministry.
- 2. Closing Image: A Christian leader from Sri Lank, Ajith Fernando writes...

## MANUSCRIPT

When I think of my assignments from high school, I don't remember very many of them. But I do remember one. My high school physics teachers assigned us a project. Make bridge out of balsa wood to withstand as much weight as possible. I can't remember the required weight. He gave each group two attempts. Of the two attempts, he would use the larger number to score us.

I still remember the first attempt. The contraption made to test the bridge resembled a giant press. He set our bridge on a stand. He placed a flat piece of wood on top of the bridge. He placed weights beginning with a 45-pound barbell. He continued adding weight until the bridge crumbled or he ran out weights.

When my physics teacher placed a third 45-pound barbell on the press, our bridge began to bow. Another weight could crush our bridge. Sure enough, the fourth weight shattered our bridge into splinters. Our bridge could not withstand the weight.

Luckily, we had one more attempt. My partner and I returned to the drawing board. If we could reinforce the columns of our bridge then it may withstand the weights. This led to bridge two point zero.

The day of our second attempt arrived. Again, we placed the bridge in the jaws of death. Every time my physics teacher placed a weight on our bridge, I held my breath. But the bridge maintained its structural integrity. Eventually, my teacher ran out of weights. I breathed a sigh of relief. Our bridge succeeded in withstanding whatever weight my physics teacher placed on it.

Like my high school physics bridge, success in life depends on the ability to withstand the weight of life. By weight of life, I mean hardship. **Success depends on the ability to withstand hardship.** A rocket launches successfully when it withstands the vibrations of its powerful rocket engine to escape the pull of gravity. A marriage succeeds when a husband-and-wife withstand the loss of a child, fierce arguments, or financial trouble together. A student succeeds in their classes when they withstand the academic rigors – studying late in the night, reading texts books, and solving problems. Young parents succeed when they withstand the hardship of interrupted sleep, late night feedings, and regular diaper changes to care for their infant. **Success depends on the ability to withstand hardship.**

A successful church flourishes. When does a church flourish? **A church flourishes when it endures hardship to advance the gospel.** The church may face ridicule, social alienation, mockery, or even death. But the church flourishes when it withstands the hardship to the advance of the gospel. Nothing deters it. **A church flourishes when it endures hardship to advance the gospel.**

The Thessalonian church recorded in the New Testament of our Bibles exemplifies such a flourishing church. The Thessalonian church was a church that knew what it meant to suffer for the gospel.

Paul and Silas came to Thessalonica after the Roman authorities asked them to leave Philippi. They established a church there. It wasn't long before a mob forced them to leave. Although Paul and Silas left town, hardship persisted for the Thessalonian church. This prompted Paul to write a letter to them.

This letter is found in the book titled **first Thessalonians** in your Bibles. Please turn there if you're not there already. **First Thessalonians.**

This morning we'll learn about a flourishing church that endures hardship to advance the gospel. We'll discuss three questions. **Why does a flourishing church need to endure hardship? What does gospel work care about? Who does faithful gospel work reach?**

First question, why does a flourishing church need to endure hardship? **Hardship often accompanies gospel work.** Where gospel work occurs, hardship and suffering often follow it. You share the gospel with someone. They may laugh at you. When you share with friends that you've decided to follow Christ. They may label you: "Crazy radical". When your parents discover your faith in Christ, they may disown you. **Hardship often accompanies gospel work.**

The Thessalonians encountered similar ridicule when they shared the gospel with others. It may have escalated to violence. Just as a mob dragged Jason out of his home through the streets of Thessalonica, unbelieving mobs may have dragged out other Christians. The Thessalonians discovered gospel work meant enduring hardship.

The news of their hardship eventually reached Paul in Athens. Paul feared that the Thessalonians might think: "It's not worth it to believe in Jesus Christ. Only trials, suffering, and hardship followed our profession of faith" and depart the faith. When Timothy and Silas arrived in Athens, they decided to send Timothy to check on the Thessalonian church. **Paul sent Timothy to remind the Thessalonians to endure hardship in gospel work.**

Why does Paul send Timothy? **Paul sends Timothy because of his faithfulness.** Look with me at first Thessalonians, chapter three, verse one. Paul writes: *"Therefore when we could bear it no longer we were willing to be left behind in Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our*

*brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ."* Paul uses two phrases to describe Timothy: "our brother" and "God's coworker in the gospel of Christ". Paul uses the word: brother to refer to those who serve with him. Timothy served alongside with Paul in his second missionary journey. Second, the phrase: "God's coworker in the gospel of Christ" highlights Timothy's work alongside Paul to share the gospel with others. Timothy's faithfulness in the past led Paul to send Timothy on his first mission to Thessalonica.

Paul sent Timothy to the Thessalonians with one task. Preparation. **Timothy prepared the Thessalonians to endure when hardships came.** Verse two continues: *"to establish and exhort you in your faith that no one be moved by these afflictions."* Timothy worked to strengthen and fortify the faith of the Thessalonians.

This lesson should have echoed something that Paul had taught them before. **Paul taught the Thessalonians to expect hardships.** He writes in the latter half of verse 3: *"For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 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."*

Why is it that the Thessalonians should have expected hardship? Paul may have thought about the teaching of Jesus. If we say that Jesus is our master and teacher, then should not our life as believers mimic his?

If Jesus experienced the scorn of religious leaders, then should not his followers also expect the scorn of religious leaders? If temple soldiers arrested Jesus for his message, then should not his followers expect to be arrested for the same message? If Jesus laid down his life for the sake of others, then should not his followers also lay down their lives for the sake of

others? If Jesus experienced hardship and we are his followers, then what makes us think that we can escape such hardship?

But the suffering of the Thessalonians caused Paul to worry. **If the Thessalonians failed to withstand hardship, then Paul's ministry failed.** Look with me at his words in verse five: *"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."*

What was the temptation? Paul feared that the tempter aka Satan aka the adversary might convince the Thessalonians: "It's not worth it to believe in Christ. It's not worth the trouble to follow God. Why would you want to follow God if it means having to undergo all this hardship?" This would result in the failure of Paul's ministry.

What would it mean that Paul's ministry failed? It meant that the work of Paul and Silas failed to produce a resolute church in Thessalonica. No one would serve as a witness for the gospel in Thessalonica. Again, this prompted Paul to send Timothy to strengthen the faith of the Thessalonian believers.

If hardship often accompanies gospel work, then **Prepare yourself for the hardships of gospel work.** What kind of hardships can we expect? While there may be many, let me share with you two.

**Prepare yourself for misunderstanding as you teach the gospel to unbelievers.**

Unbelievers may label you as intolerant when you talk about sin. They may object saying every person determines for himself or herself what is right and what is wrong. They do not believe in moral absolutes. People may label you as moralistic because of your lifestyle. They think that our moral lifestyle make God smile upon us. We don't believe that following morals can save us

because no good we ever do can ever make us worthy of God. Only through faith in Jesus Christ can we be saved. And we live morally not because we want to be saved. We live morally because we have been saved through Christ. The gospel speaks against moralism and relativism. Expect misunderstanding.

**Prepare yourself for ridicule when you explain the gospel to unbelievers.** Some people will find the gospel silly. Think about it. We believe in a Jewish man who lives two thousand years ago and claimed to be God. Not only did he claim to be God, but he also died on the cross for the sins of humanity: past, present, and future, so that those who believe in him might have eternal life. Did I also mention, he rose from the dead? Yup. Three days after he dies, he comes back to life. We also believe that he ascended to heaven and he's coming back to establish his kingdom. If you think about it, this sounds incredible. Yet we find it true because the Spirit helped us make sense of it. For those who do not have the Spirit, the truths of the gospel sound like fantasy. But those who have the Spirit see that the gospel leads life.

Let's move onto the second question. *What does gospel work care about?* **Gospel work cares about the spiritual well-being of people.** Gospel work focuses on the spiritual health of people. Christians wonder: what is the spiritual state of a person? Are they lost? Are they saved? If they are saved, then are they walking with the Lord? Or are they living in disobedience? Are people discouraged? If we engage in gospel work, then we care about people. **Gospel work cares about the spiritual well-being of people.**

**Paul cared for the Thessalonians because they represented his joy.** How did the Thessalonians know that he cared? They couldn't see him. He was miles away in another city.

Paul wrote about his longing to see them. **Paul longed to see the Thessalonians because he cared for them.** Look with me at verse 17: *“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”*

The Greek world used the phrase: “torn away” to describe the feeling of parents losing their child or a child losing their parents. I imagine the shock I would feel if someone told me: “Henry, I’m sorry. But your mom just passed away suddenly to be with the Lord.” It would wrench my soul. Paul describes his separation from the Thessalonians as heart wrenching.

Time and time again Paul tried to come. Note the phrase: again and again. When Paul may have went to the port of Athens to find a boat back to Thessalonica, he couldn’t find an open seat. Maybe he tried to join a caravan to return to Thessalonica, but weather delayed the trip. Another ministry opportunity in another city required his attention. Despite the inability to return, Paul thought of the Thessalonians.

Who prevented Paul from returning? Satan. Satan hindered Paul’s return. Look with me at the latter half of verse 18: *“But Satan hindered us”*. The one who rules over this age and world employed all his ability to prevent Paul’s return. Note the word: hinder comes from the context of the military. The Roman military would hinder enemy movement by setting up blockades or tearing up roads. Satan knew that if Paul returned, then it would make turning the Thessalonians away from God more difficult.

Why did Paul care so much about the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians that he worked so hard to return? **The spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians represented Paul’s**

**reward before Christ.** Paul writes this in verse nineteen: *“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus as his coming? Is it not you? For you are you glory and joy.”*

Paul equates the Thessalonians to three words: hope, joy, and crown. Paul equates the Thessalonians with hope because he hopes to see them in the presence of Jesus when he returns. If the Thessalonian leave the faith, then they would not be present. Yet Paul using the word: hope declares his confidence of their presence when Christ returns. Paul equates the Thessalonians with the word: joy. Paul and Silas would celebrate at the presence of the Thessalonians when Jesus returns. They had persevered even in the midst of the difficult trials they faced. Paul lastly describes the Thessalonians as a crown. The word: crown conjures in our minds thoughts of royal diadems made of gold set with precious gems. But the word: crown ought to conjure up the image of a wreath awarded to an athlete when he wins a race. The crown served as a symbol of reward and commendation.

The idea of reward or commendation sounds odd to our ears. After all, don't all believers receive eternal life. Should that not be enough? Yet there's an idea of receiving commendation from the Lord in the New Testament. For instance, we strive to be faithful to God so that we might hear the words: *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”*

This commendation we earn without recognizing it. Think about the judgment of the sheep and the goats. Jesus commends the sheep for their faithfulness. But the sheep ask: *“Uhh... when do we do these things?”* They didn't even know that their actions would receive commendation.

Imagine going to Starbucks to get your morning coffee. It's been a rough week for everyone at the office. You know everyone wishes they could get a few more hours of sleep.

But the project required everyone working late hours. You decide to get enough coffee for the team. When the team sees you come in with the coffee, they woot and holler. Your boss runs into you later that day in a hallway. He says to you: “Hey! Thanks for bringing the coffee this morning. The team appreciates it.” You didn’t get the coffee to receive a good job. You just thought it would be a nice thing to do. We often do things without expecting commendation.

Paul cares for the well-being of the Thessalonians because Jesus will assess his ministry. Jesus will assess his ministry based upon who has Paul shepherded. With whom did Paul share the gospel? Who did Paul correct when they walked in their sin to return to fellowship with God? Who did Paul encourage when they felt down? Who did Paul pray for? Jesus bases his assessment on the who of ministry and not the what of ministry.

If Jesus bases his assessment on how Paul cared for people, then the same standard applies to us. We need to **care about the spiritual well-being of people**. This requires us to think about how do we gauge success in gospel work? How do we assess whether or not a ministry is flourishing?

Often, **we use the wrong standards to measure the flourishing of a ministry**. Do we look to our attendance numbers? If the attendance numbers go up, then does that mean that the ministry is flourishing? But if we look at the number more carefully, then we may discover that the bump of numbers results from Christians from other churches joining ours. Do we look at the size of our facility? Our ministry must be flourishing because our facility continues to grow. When Jesus asks us to give an account of our ministry, will we say to him: “Look how large of a church building we built for you”. Think about the beautiful cathedrals in Europe that remain empty on Sunday mornings. Do we look to the number of Sunday school courses we

offer? If offer ten classes on various topics, then does it make our ministry more successful? We will say to Jesus: “Jesus, look at all the Sunday school classes that I have taught.” Do we pride ourselves in how many of the books of the Bible that we have studied in our small groups? We went through all sixty-six books of the Bible.

**God evaluates the success of gospel work by how we cared for people.** Do we help the unbelievers that attend our church understand the gospel? Do we pray for their salvation? Do we help the believers in our midst to grow in their love for God and love for neighbor? When a believer grieves the loss of a family member, do we sit and grieve with them? When a believer expresses doubts about faith, do we listen to their doubts and remind them of gospel truths? How do we use our facility to proclaim the gospel in our community? Do our Sunday school classes not only build one’s knowledge but encourage obedience to the Lord? Does what we learn change the way we live our lives? When we go to small group, do our Bible studies challenge participants to examine their lives? Or do we just go to have our spiritual conversation fix for the week and go back to doing the same old thing?

Let’s move to our last question. Who does gospel work reach? **Faithful gospel work reaches all people.** A flourishing church focuses on making Christ know to all types of people. It doesn’t matter the ethnicity or socio-economic background. Faithful gospel work preaches the gospel to everyone.

**Paul commends the Thessalonians for their work to reach all people in spite of the hardships.** When the Thessalonians heard Paul preach the gospel for the first time in the synagogue, a light bulb went off in their mind. The God-fearing Gentiles and women of the city learned: We can have a relationship with God without having to follow the Jewish law. This

message then leads many there to place their faith in Christ and leave the synagogue to establish the church. These new believers begin to share the gospel with others in their community (1 Thess 1:8).

**Paul gives thanks for the work of the word of God in the Thessalonians.** Paul writes this in verse 13: *“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received 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.”* The Spirit has produced spiritual fruit in their lives such as faith, love, and hope (1:3). They turned away from idols (1:10). It also led them to share the gospel with others. But hardship and suffering accompanied their ministry.

**Paul equates the suffering of the Thessalonians to the Judean church.** He writes in verse fourteen: *“For you became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea.”* The word: Judea refers not just to land of Judah in southern Palestine. But it refers to the whole region including Galilee and Capernaum. The ministry of the Thessalonians resembled the ministry of the church that began there. The Thessalonians also experienced the same type of suffering.

**The Thessalonians preached the gospel to all led to their suffering.** Look with me at the latter half of verse fourteen: *“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 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”*

Note how Paul describes the Jews and those who persecute the Thessalonian believers. “Oppose all mankind, by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved”. Why did the Jews kill Jesus? Yes, Jesus claimed to be Messiah. But he also turned the Jewish religious system at time upside down. Instead of spending time with religious leaders, Jesus spent time preaching the gospel to the common people. He offered salvation to the tax-collector, the leper, the prostitute, and the poor. He even commended the faith of Gentiles on occasion in his ministry. Everyone could have eternal life if they believed in Jesus.

Think about the ministry of the apostles. What threw the early church into crisis? Can the Gentiles be saved? Can those who are non-Jews receive the same salvation that Peter, James, and John received? And Jesus answered: “Yes.” But then did these Gentile believers have to receive circumcision and follow the Old Testament law. The church leaders at the Jerusalem council decided: “No” because as Christians they were under the new covenant of the Spirit. This led to Paul’s missionary journeys to share the gospel with the Gentiles.

Paul always began his ministry in the synagogue of a new city whenever possible. Often, the Gentile God-fearers responded first to his message. Why? The God-fearers could never be part of the family of Abraham because they were not Jewish. But when they heard the gospel, they learned that they could be part of the family of Abraham through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This led to many of them to profess faith in Christ.

The inclusion of the Gentiles into the family of God prompted jealousy among unbelieving Jews. Paul cites this specific reason in first Thessalonians. The Jews hindered Paul and the apostles from sharing the gospel to the Gentiles. This prompted the Jews in Thessalonica to stir up Gentiles to run Paul’s company out of town. What caused the hardship,

suffering, and persecution specifically among the Thessalonians? They preached a message of salvation to all people.

What is the implication for us as a church? **Think about how we can work together as a church to reach all people.** We should find ways to work together to **reach all age groups** at our church from the children to the youth to the college students to young adults and families and retired. We need to work together. We also should find ways to reach **different socio-economic classes**. How can we partner with organizations in our city to reach the poor and economically depressed? Not only do we contribute finances, but how do we contribute our time and services? We should think about how to **reach people of all different ethnic backgrounds**. How can we as a church partner with other churches to reach the Spanish-speaking community, the Indian community, the Vietnamese community, or the African American community? How do we reach the internationals in our community? How do we also use our resources to reach the unreached in other parts of the world? This might involve praying for these unreached people groups. For some, it could mean training to go to these places. For others of us, it means to continue to support workers that we have sent out.

**A church flourishes when it endures hardship to advance gospel work.** May our church advance the work of our savior to reach all people. May we remember that the focus of gospel work is the spiritual welfare of people. When we experience hardships associated with gospel work, may we endure.

Suffering and hardship line the path to a flourishing church. A Christian leader from Sri Lanka named Ajith Fernando writes: "I think one of the most serious theological blind spots in the western church is a defective understanding of suffering. There seems to be a lot of

reflection on how to avoid suffering and on what to do when we hurt. We have a lot of teaching about escape from suffering and therapy for suffering, but there is inadequate teaching about the theology of suffering ....

The "good life," comfort, convenience, and a painless life have become necessities that people view as basic rights. If they do not have these, they think something has gone wrong .... One of the results of this attitude is a severe restriction of spiritual growth, for God intends us to grow through trials.

This applies not only to Christians, but to the church as well. Are we willing to endure hardships and suffering in order to advance gospel work? Are we a church that knows how to suffer?