

# **The Suffering Challenge**

**Series: I Thessalonians: A Message For Our Times**

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As I was reading 1 Thessalonians I realize there are some very applicable messages for the times in which we live. Over the next four weeks I want to give us four messages that will instruct and encourage our hearts as we navigate covid 19, political tensions, and economic uncertainties. Each will be presented as a challenge-a challenge to see things realistically through the eyes of Jesus.(Thessalonica a church in Asia Minor we read about in Acts 17 where Paul and his companions visited on the second missionary journey-he was there a short time and because of persecution had to leave this young church too soon.)

Have you ever watched the shows about those who choose to live off the grid, in some remote part of the wilderness of Alaska or the Rockies? The struggles of such a life seem to never end. Life is lived around survival-gathering food, building shelter, tending animals, protecting against predators, and supplying water. Luxuries are few. Work is common. Days are long. Life is just hard.

1.2 billion people live without electricity in world today (16% of the population)

1.6 billion people have inadequate shelter (Habitat for Humanity)

2 billion people live with food insecurity

In 2018 there were 50 nations run by dictators or authoritarian regimes-causing the population to live in fear.

Half the world's population does not receive adequate medical care as needed.

Over 2 billion people do not have access to clean water

35 % of the world's population lacks adequate sanitation.

736 million people live on less than \$2 per day of income/ half the world lives on less than \$5.50 per day.(Someone making \$50,000 per year makes \$137 per day.)

153 million orphans worldwide

1.5 billion people have no Bible of their own.

This is not a sermon about feeling guilty about being well-off compared to the rest of the world, or about eating all the food on your plate because there are starving children in China. This isn't really about compassion per se. It is more about Christian resilience. It is about learning to accept the world as is, i.e. it is fallen and full of trouble. As our new Wednesday series says, It is a "World of Hurt." Jesus and His inspired spokesmen set the tone for how we as followers of Christ are designed to live in this fallen, trouble-laden world.

The Suffering Challenge. 1 Thessalonians has six specific challenges related to suffering. Here is the heart of the challenge. Suffering is inevitable, but what will be continue to do in the midst of our suffering.

- **Can you hear the message while suffering?** For many suffering drowns out God's message. 1 Thess.1: 2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.
  - The strongest Christians I know turn to God's word during periods of their greatest sufferings.
  - **Where Could I Go But to the Lord?** (Song) verse: Life here is grand, with friends I love so dear; Comfort I get from God's own word; Yet when I face this chilling hand of death; Where could I go but to the Lord?
- **Can you tell the message while suffering?** For many suffering is so distracting that they can't tell the message of God to others. 1 Thess.2: 1 You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. 2 We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.
  - The strongest Christians I know are sharing the message of God's love and faithfulness right up to the point of loss of consciousness or death.
  - Have you ever had the experience of visiting someone who is suffering to comfort them and you come away receiving more encouragement than you gave?
- **Can you relieve another's burden while suffering?** Many are so busy with their own burden, they cannot help carry the burden of others. 1 Thess.2: 7 Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8 so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. 9 Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.
  - It is inspiring when someone is injured and in pain, but has the will and strength to not think of themselves, but to help others around them.
- **Can you understand another's suffering while suffering?** A person may be so focused on their own pain that they cannot even understand the pain

of others around them. 1 Thess.2: 14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews.

- When I was 15 and lost my mother, I am sure at the time I was pretty focused on my own suffering. It wasn't until I grew and was married that I began to understand the suffering of my father on that long trip home alone from Nashville to Valdosta after she died. That 8 hour journey had to have been one of the hardest of his life.
- **Can you remain settled while suffering?** There is something admirable about the person who can stay calm and spiritually centered even while suffering. 1 Thess.3: 1 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.
  - Trials can be unsettling. Being able to stay spiritually focused in the midst of our suffering is commendable. The winds may beat upon our houses but they can stand because they are built upon the rock.
- **Can you stay encouraged while suffering?** Discouragement is common in suffering. The person who can hold on to their courage in the midst of suffering is to be admired. 1 Thess.3: 6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.
  - Having enough courage to pass through the suffering is also commendable.

Building resilience can also help you to:

- Stay focused, flexible, and productive, in both good and bad times.
- Feel less afraid of new experiences or an uncertain future.
- Manage and tolerate strong emotions outside your comfort zone, even those you'd rather avoid like anger or despair.
- Strengthen your relationships and improve your communication skills, especially under pressure.
- Bolster your self-esteem.
- Be confident you'll eventually find a solution to a problem, even when one isn't immediately apparent.

Instead of complaining about our circumstances let's all set our minds of building greater spiritual resilience in times like these.