



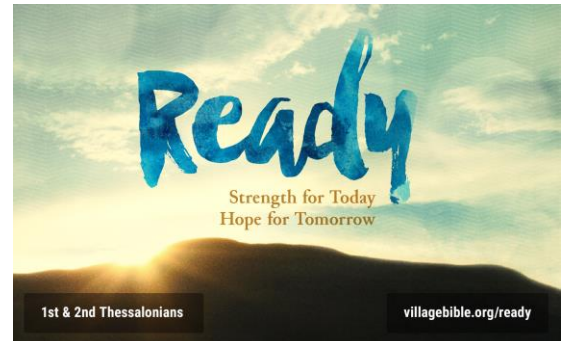
VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Walking Worthy

Ready: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow | Part 3

Tim Badal | January 24, 2016 | 1 Thessalonians 2:13–20



We've been in a series entitled "Ready: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow." We've been learning about what it means to be ready for the issues, struggles, trials and tribulations that may come in the days ahead, while having hope that God is in control throughout all the things that we may face each and every day. Also we've been learning about the hope that Jesus Christ will come back and take us to heaven. This is what the letters to the Thessalonian church are all about. Paul is trying to prepare the people in Thessalonica to be ready. As we read their letters, we are reminded that we are to be ready to serve and honor God, give to Him, minister for Him and be ready for all that He calls us to in His Word.

Before we get into our passage, I want us to begin in verse 12 where Paul exhorts the people in Thessalonica with one job. He says, *"We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory."* That word "walk" is used throughout Scripture. In fact it's used 100 different times in the New Testament and five times in the books of First and Second Thessalonians. The idea of "walk" is synonymous with living the Christian life. Just as each and every day we get up and take step after step into our lives, so too the Christian life is a process of taking one step after another as we journey through this life closer and closer to Jesus Christ. But as we learned, at times walking isn't as easy as we may want it to be.

Some of you may be aware that my family got away this past week for a vacation and went on a cruise. We mocked you incessantly when we saw the below zero weather while we were enjoying 80 degree weather and we hated coming back. On the second day on the boat we hit some rough waters. The storm that is now pummeling the east coast was coming from the Gulf of Mexico and the seas got pretty rocky. Walking became difficult. We looked like a bunch of drunk people walking on the ship. We were wobbling back and forth and struggling to walk because the world around us was shaking. We were not on a firm foundation. We couldn't go anywhere without seeing people really faltering as they walked.

We are called as Christians to walk worthy—walk firmly. Just like on that cruise ship, there are moments in our lives when walking isn't going to be easy. The waves of trials, tribulations and temptation will come. The job of those waves is to knock us down. We've got to be grounded. I was amazed to see that the crew on the ship seemed unfazed by it. They were walking with all this food and beautiful glassware, and we were falling all over the place. They would say, "How are you doing today? I hope you're having a great day!" completely unfazed by the rocking waves around them. Why is that? Because they had learned how to walk even in the most severe storms.

Paul is teaching us how, amidst the waves that come crashing into our world, we can walk in such a way that we don't falter, that we're not hindered; how we can walk confidently in the Lord and serve Him well. How do we get there? How do we become able to weather whatever storm comes our way? The answer is seen in verses 13–16. We're going to look at two ways that we can walk worthy of the Lord.

1. Response to Biblical Preaching

How you respond when the Word of God is taught is indicative of how you are going to live your life as a follower of Jesus Christ. The Word of God was given so that you and I may not falter or fall in our walk with God. The psalmist says, *"How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word"* (Psalm 119:9). Paul says, "You want to walk worthy amidst all the trials and tribulations that you face? You need to respond in a certain way when the Word of God is taught, when you read it, and when you study it so that you may respond in the right way."

Before we dig in to this passage I'd like to remind you what God has called me to do as the preacher. Nowhere in this text does Paul talk about his ideas on preaching, but he does in Second Timothy. Let's see what Paul had to say to Timothy about preaching. In one of his last words to his young disciple, Paul says, "This is your job as a preacher. It's not going to be easy. It's not going to be all fun and games. But I'm going to give you four things you need to remember when you preach." These are the same four things that every preacher who stands in the pulpit needs to be doing. Whoever the elders place in this pulpit is called to do the following. This is my job description. Second Timothy 4:1–4 says:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

In these four verses we are given four points of a job description for every preacher.

1. **Preach biblically.** He says, *"Preach the word."* My job is not to preach the newspaper. My job is not to preach the latest music video I saw on TV. My job is not to preach about the gossip of the church. My job is not to preach wonderful, flowery stories from *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. My job is to preach one particular text: The Word of God. How we do that in this church is we take a book of the Bible and walk through it verse by verse. We want to preach the Word of God.

I have to preach biblically because I'm preaching *"in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus."* You are not my audience. I'm not really all that concerned that you come up to me after the message and say, "Tim, that was a great message!" It makes me feel good but that's not the purpose. The purpose for this preacher is to recognize that he is not preaching to hundreds in this church building but preaching before an audience of One. At the end of the day when I'm done preaching, the question is, "Did God say, 'Well done!'" I don't care if multitudes of people come and say, "That was outstanding!" If God says, "You blew it! You didn't say what I said in that text. You didn't address that text the way I wrote it," then I have failed not only you but also my calling as a preacher before the Lord.

2. **Preach authoritatively.** The idea of preaching the Word literally means to be a herald—one who proclaims a message. Timothy would have understood what this meant. We don't because we're involved in mass communication. We get our information through social media. Back in Timothy's day if a king or ruler wanted to get a message across to his people, he would send runners out as messengers.

Let's use the example from the Christmas story. Caesar Augustus issued a decree. He didn't go on CNN, write in the *Chicago Tribune* or put it on Facebook. None of those things were around. He sent out hundreds, maybe even thousands, of men to run or ride horses to particular cities. Those messengers would go to the city gate and announce, "Hear ye! Hear ye! Caesar Augustus has issued a decree." The messenger would not announce the decree on his own authority because he was just the messenger. He spoke with the king's authority. "Caesar Augustus has issued a decree that every man go back to his hometown for a census. Bring your money because you're going to be taxed." Someone might say, "Who are you to tell us that? You're just a mere messenger." He would reply, "I'm not speaking on my authority. I'm speaking on behalf of the king."

As a preacher I carry no authority at all. I'm a 39-year-old man with minimal education, I run a catering business and I struggle to exercise. I have many struggles in my life, as many of you do, and I struggle with preaching. I carry no authority. I have nothing apart from the Word of God that I proclaim. When we hear from a preacher who preaches biblically, we're not hearing from them but from God.

3. **Preach pastorally.** That means preach to a group of people we know. That means be willing to do some difficult things in their lives. In verse two, Paul says preach in season and out of season—when it's popular and when it's not. He says, *"Reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."* A preacher's job is to get into your life and get personal

with you. We should ask the hard questions. Our job is to drill into your life as we speak the Word of God. Why? Because the Word of God is a double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). If we're the herald of that double-edged sword, that sword is going into each one of our hearts, cutting into our lives, asking questions and demanding answers from us. Our job is not to demand that you answer us, but to cause you to answer the question that God is demanding of you.

We have to be careful because some will say that now I'm going to get into everybody's business and really let people have it. Paul says, "Timothy, this is not license to beat up on people. You're going to do these things with complete patience because just like the people you're preaching to, you were lost and without Christ. You were once a sinner and outside of the salvation of God. You are still a work in progress, too." So what do we do? We teach. The idea of teaching is like a mother and father who daily teach their children what it means to be a solid human being and live life in a godly way. Every week we do the same thing. We pick up this book and say, "What are we to learn from it? How are we to grow from it?" We are to preach this word pastorally.

4. **Preach persistently.** Verses three and four say, *"For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."* Paul says to Timothy, "What you're going to do isn't going to be popular. There will be people who get up and leave and say, 'I don't like what you're teaching. I'll go find someone who teaches something different and makes me feel better about what I'm doing.'" My Sunday mornings go a whole lot faster if someone can get up and say, "You're great. You're wonderful. You're the best thing in the world. The world revolves around you." That's easy to listen to. That makes me feel good. But Timothy was told, "Even when people walk away, you keep doing what you're called to do. Preach the Word persistently."

Nowhere in the text does it say a preacher's job is to entertain. Nowhere does it say, "Make sure you make your audience laugh in your sermon." "Make sure you get them to cry with tear-jerking stories." "Make sure you keep the listener's attention because they live in an ADD world and they're going to struggle. So make sure you keep their attention and do it with glitz and glamour, with the best presentation you can find." Paul said, *"[I] did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom"* (1 Corinthians 2:1). He says, "I didn't have all the words. I came to you in a shameful way because I was broken, beat up and knocked down, yet you still listened to the Word of God." The job of the preacher is to preach the Word.

They appreciate it

In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul says, *"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."* How do you walk worthy? You receive the Word of God by appreciating when it is taught. The text says, *"You received the word of God, which you heard from us."*

They shared a message and the Thessalonians literally put out the welcome mat. They prepared themselves to hear the Word of God taught. They looked forward to it. They anticipated it. They made sure that they were ready to receive it. When he says "received" he's literally giving the word picture of hospitality. You're inviting some friends over whom you haven't seen for a while so you clean and prepare the house. You're excited. You've put the date on the calendar and you think, "Only a couple more days and the Johnsons will be here! We'll be able to reminisce and talk with them." You prepare everything so that the time with the Johnsons is the best time you could ever have. Why? Because you appreciate who you're welcoming into your home.

Paul was not talking to people who were in the process of trying to understand God or searching the claims of Christianity. Paul was talking to Christians. Likewise, I'm talking to fellow Christians at Village Bible Church who have heard the Word of God taught over and over again. Do you appreciate the preaching of the Word? The way you respond to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God goes hand in hand with how you respond to Jesus Christ.

Not only do we serve Jesus Christ, Who is the living Word, we also revere and uphold the written Word of the Scriptures. Jesus and the Word are synonymous when they are described. Jesus and the Bible are both called Bread, Light and Truth. How ready were you to hear the Word of God this morning? Starting last night or as you got up this morning, did you prepare your heart? "Lord, I'm going to hear from You tomorrow and I want to hear You in the right way. How do I prepare my heart to hear what You have to tell me tomorrow? Lord, I'm going to pray especially for Tim Badal because I don't want to hear from him but from You. Make him decrease so that You might increase; so that when he preaches the Word I can know he has brought the Word of God and I can apply it to my life." Are you appreciating the Word of God?

When I talk about receiving the Word, I'm not just talking about when I'm preaching but I'm talking about the whole service. You haven't heard anything about the NFL football games during the service. You haven't heard anything about the ongoing political campaigns. Everything we've done up to this point is all about Jesus Christ. Here's the dilemma: for those who say they love Jesus, as soon as you sit down far too many of you are more concerned about when the service will be over than the preaching of the Word of God. You're thinking, "When are we going to be done? We sang too much. Tim talks too much. This thing is going on too long." As Christians we struggle because we forget that we're called to receive the Word of God.

Let's say I get a postcard in the mail and it says an organization is holding a recognition dinner for my wife, Amanda. It's going to be at the Hyatt Regency Ballroom and the night is dedicated to loving on Amanda and recognizing what a great wife, mother, community member and pastor's wife she is. We dress up and go to the dinner and they start talking about Amanda. Person after person gets up and says all kinds of wonderful things about her. And I say, "Are we done already? Enough about this woman! Are they ever going to serve dessert? If you've heard one story about the woman you've heard them all. I can give you a couple of stories. Enough is enough!" If these would be my thoughts, my problem isn't with the presenters or the organizers of the event. My problem would be that I don't love Amanda like I say I do. If I really love Amanda, then I will never grow tired of hearing people speak well of her.

As Christians we do this all the time with God. "When are we out of here? When are they going to serve doughnuts already? I've heard enough. Enough with Jesus." Paul says the Thessalonians walked worthy because they put out a welcome mat. "I have come to hear the Word of God spoken. I need His Word this week. If I don't get it, then this week is not going to be good for me." We receive the Word of God and we appreciate it.

They accept it

The middle part of verse 13 says, *"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."* God is speaking to you. He's knocking on every heart. The question is: Are you going to open the door of your life for Christ to enter in? He's speaking to you. He's saying, "I want you to walk worthy." Those aren't my words but His words. "I want you to walk worthy."

No doubt when we pick a church many of us go to the doctrinal statement or the statement of beliefs of that church and say, "What do they believe about the Bible?" We will determine whether we're going to stay at that church or not based on whether the Bible is considered the inspired Word of God and God breathed. Paul told Timothy that God spoke these words to the hearts of men who then wrote them in the Scriptures. You say, "I believe that. I affirm that." But when it comes to recognizing and accepting what is taught, we are quick to say, "That's not for me. I don't need to listen. That's just Tim going off on his own interpretation." The Thessalonians accepted it. They weren't hearing from the wise, old sage, the Apostle Paul. They knew that they were hearing from God.

Every time the Word of God is opened it's an opportunity for you to hear from God. The question is: Are you listening to what He has to say? The psalmist put it this way in Psalm 19 when it came to teaching and revering the Word of God:

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
⁸the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

Do you agree with that? Do you accept the Word of God when it is taught?

Three questions:

1. Would you rather have the Bible than food? Job said, *"I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food"* (Job 23:12b). God's Word is described as bread, milk and meat. It's even described as honey. Would you rather have food than the Word?
2. Would you rather have God's Word than money? The writer of Psalm 19 made it clear that he would rather have the Word of God than all riches. He would rather have the Word of God than thousands of pieces of gold and silver. He'd rather have the Word than all the fine gold in the world. He'd rather have the Scriptures than the great spoils of the earth. Would you rather have God's Word or money?
3. Would you rather have God's Word than sleep? Once again the psalmist says, *"My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promise"* (Psalm 119:148). He says, *"I'm looking forward to some quiet time. Not so that I can rest or close my eyes, but to have an opportunity to hear and meditate on the Word of God."*

Paul says you have to receive and accept God's Word.

They apply it

In First Thessalonians Paul says, "This Word is at work in you." They looked forward to it. They recognized where it had come from and when it was finished being shared with them they immediately sought to apply it to their lives. The phrase "at work" is the Greek word *energeia* where we get the English word "energy." We hear the Word of God preached in our lives and receive it. We say, "Lord, you're speaking to me." Then what happens when we get up and walk out? Studies tell us that the majority of preaching is forgotten within two hours of hearing it. They had people go to church and then they called them later and asked, "What do you remember about the sermon?" Within two hours they had forgotten what the sermon was all about. How can you apply that which you've forgotten?

The Thessalonians said, "We're not going to forget this. It's the Word of God. God is speaking to us and we're going to hear it, recognize it for what it is and apply it to our lives. It's going to do something to us." They took to heart what was being said. It changed them. How did it change them? First Thessalonians 1:9 says, *"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."* They were willing to give up their idols. They said, "The Word of God says I've got to give that up. I heard from the Apostle Paul in church that I can't continue to worship these idols. I've got to give them up." They turned away from their idols.

First Thessalonians 1:6 says, *"You received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit."* "How's life going for you right now, Steve?"

"Not that well, Tim. Thanks for asking. I'm getting beat up pretty good."

"Why?"

"Because I follow Christ."

"Well, why is there a smile on your face?"

"Because the Word of God says it's okay. These light and momentary trials won't compare in any way to the exceeding glory that's coming my way. I'm going to hold to the Word of God, not to circumstances of life."

Chapter three says they left behind sexual immorality. They walked away from that so they could walk in fellowship with Christ. Chapter four says even though trials and tribulations were facing them, they looked for the return of Christ with hopeful expectation. This forces us at Village Bible Church to ask how we should respond to the Word. When was the last time you took what the preacher said and applied it to your life and meditated on it throughout the week? The Word Bible is our middle name—Village Bible Church. Is the Bible central to all that we do? It was for the Thessalonians and because of that they were able to walk worthy amidst the storm.

Why in the world would Paul spend so much time talking about receiving, accepting and applying the Word of God? Because Paul recognized that we too need a foundation. We need to recognize where we are going to turn when life goes south for us—when the circumstances of life don't go the way we think they should, when we get the medical report and it's positive, when the relationship that you thought would be forever has fallen apart, when the child you dreamed of seems to be going astray, when the money you thought would be in your account is no longer there. In these moments the Word of God allows us to stand strong, even when the ship of our lives is rocking back and forth.

2. Reaction to the Persecution they Face

Paul says, "Understand and study the Word of God. Know it. Apply it to your life so that when difficult times come you're able to weather the storm." To walk worthy is to react in the proper way when persecution comes. How are we going to react when persecution comes our way? Verses 14–16 say:

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 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!"

The Thessalonians had watched the Apostle Paul be driven out of their city by a mob that hated the gospel. Paul then headed to Berea where he had some initial success, only to have the same mob from Thessalonica head over to Berea, beat them up and stop them from preaching the gospel. They were spectators to that. They saw what was going on. "Man, Paul is really having a hard time here." But as we learn in the text, that same persecution that Paul was facing was now coming on the Thessalonians. They were under great affliction. The book of Acts says a man in Thessalonica named Jason and some other leaders of the church were charged numerous fines for holding to the Christian faith. Trouble was coming their way.

It wasn't easy to convert from Judaism to Christianity in Thessalonica. People lost their jobs as a result of their faith. They lost their property and community standing. Their families disowned them because of their love for Jesus. For the most part none of that applies to us here in America. If it happens it's usually on a very small level. But that wasn't always the case in Thessalonica and it may not always be the case here in America. The persecution that we are spectators of around the world may one day come into our lives. In those moments are we going to choose Christ or our comfort? Will we choose to follow our Savior or society? If we're grounded on the Word of God and we believe what it says, then Christ says that we will stand firm in those troubled times.

Before we understand this idea of persecution we have to understand where it came from. Paul says that the Jews were doing the persecuting. This passage of Scripture has been used by Christians to inflict great harm on the Jewish people so in some ways, we need to own what our forefathers of the faith did as a result of this. When Paul says this, is he speaking generically of all Jewish people in all times and places? It would probably have been hard for Paul to be anti-Semitic considering he was a Jew himself. Is Paul bashing the Jews and saying bigoted things about them? People are talking about this in our political world today. Can you say bigoted things about people? Was Paul saying bigoted things?

In Romans 9, 10 and 11 Paul says he was willing to be banished to hell so that his countrymen, the Jews, might be saved. He's saying, "God, I will go to hell and endure all that that entails so my countrymen, the Jewish people, can experience glory in Your presence for all eternity." That doesn't sound very anti-Semitic to me. He was willing to lay down his life for those people. In that same passage he says that the Jewish people are some of the most blessed people in the entire world. Theirs is the promise of the Messiah. Theirs are the patriarchs. Theirs are the prophets. He says, "What a blessed group of people!" So what are we to do with this passage of Scripture?

When Paul says "the Jews" he wasn't speaking of a generic group of people but about the very individuals who were doing the persecuting. I'll liken it this way: it would be as if you turned on the news and they said a large, bald individual had gone on a stealing rampage. Then when you saw me the next day you said, "You're a thief." I say, "Why are you calling me a thief?" And you say, "I heard there's a bald individual who went on a stealing spree. If that bald guy is bad then all bald guys must be bad. They're all a bunch of thieves." That's wrong. Is it wrong for us to say of an individual, "You're a thief!" if he's guilty of that? No, we're speaking the truth. Is it wrong for us to assume that because one bald man is a thief all bald men are thieves? Yes. You've become a bigot in that way. You've pronounced upon me something that isn't true.

Paul is saying, "The same people who were wreaking havoc a couple of decades ago with John the Baptist and Jesus Christ are the same ones who are coming after me and you." How did he know that? Because at one point he was the one doing the persecuting. So he says, "I know who these people are. They are guilty of these things. Not all Jews, but these Jews in particular are guilty."

When Christ was about to be crucified Pontius Pilate said, "I want nothing to do with this. I have found no reason to crucify this Jesus. I wash my hands of this man's blood." The Jews of that day pointed to Him and said, "Crucify Him!" Pilate said, "But he's innocent!" And they said, "Let his blood be on our heads. We know what we're doing. We know what we're asking for. Let us deal

with the consequences of that." As a young Pharisee, Paul was trained by those same individuals. There was only about 15–17 years between the events surrounding Easter and the writing of 1 Thessalonians. Those same individuals who hurled insults at Jesus were now hurling them at Paul.

What does this mean for us as Christians? It's a reminder that we must be very careful to not lump groups of people together. We're not struggling with the Jewish people right now, but we are struggling with Muslims. There are a lot of Christians today who are saying, "They're all bad. None of them can be trusted. We don't have to show love, sincerity or minister to them because they're all bad." I understand there are political and security questions, but at the heart of it are we lumping a group of people together? We never want that done when some crazy whack job goes into an abortion clinic and blows it up in the name of Jesus. What would we say? "He's not one of us. We would never do that."

The same ethnic issues that were going on in Paul's day are alive and well in our day. What are we concerned about? We're worried about persecution. Let us not fall prey to what the early church father Chrysostom of the fourth century did when he wrote eight sermons accusing the Jewish people of all kinds of heinous acts that weren't true. He said they were incestuous and cannibals, that they would steal other people's children. He told his congregation they should be captured and thrown to the ghettos, never to be seen again.

One of the last things the great reformer Martin Luther wrote in his very old age was a paper about the Jews and their lies. He said that Jews and their synagogues should be burned down. Their books should be stolen from them. They should be confined to prisons. Let us be careful in our fear of another group of people not to fall prey to hatred instead of love.

Persecution should not surprise us

Look at verse 14: *"For you suffered the same things..."* The struggles and troubles that the Thessalonians faced were no different from what Paul and his companions faced, or the churches around them. They couldn't say, "Woe is us! We're really struggling here. We've got it really bad. Someone come and relieve us from this." Paul says, "What you're dealing with is what everyone is dealing with. We're all in the same boat. They're persecuting all of us."

What does it mean for us who suffer so little here in America? What do we do with 2 Timothy 3:12 that says, *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted?"* When we don't experience persecution are we smarter than Jesus was? Have we figured it out? Paul seems to say that the suffering they experienced was not exceptional, but rather typical. Why do we have it so easy here then?

Some say that the persecuted church grows better Christians. Perhaps that's true. It seems to me that the witness of Scripture says that the persecuted church is better reflected in the phrase, "Better Christians tend to produce greater persecution." It's hard for you to be persecuted when you never say anything in your workplace and no one knows you're a believer. But start telling people that you're a believer, start sharing your faith actively, and you will get some resistance. You will find yourself sitting by yourself at lunch. You'll lose friends and loved ones when you stand for the truth. Not everyone will do that but many might. Paul seems to say that the reason the Thessalonians were experiencing the same struggles as the other churches was that they were doing things right.

Let's draw three conclusions about persecution:

1. When we talk about persecution (and I say this with all due respect), American Christians need to stop bellyaching about the inconveniences we face. "It's hard to be a Christian here in America." Let's be reminded of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are right now running for their lives, knowing that if they're captured they'll be decapitated for their faith. Any of you worried about that on Monday morning? We don't even have to worry about our jobs in a lot of ways. The legal system is going to be on our side and we will most likely be able to keep our jobs, even with the beliefs we have. Very rarely in America do we hear of people losing any major part of their lives because of their faith.

So stop bellyaching. We've got it so good here.

2. Let's use our freedom and opportunity to share the goodness of Christ. It's so much easier for us in the land of the free and the home of the brave to communicate that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. We might lose some credibility or popularity, but people are losing their lives around the world and they're doing so with great joy in their hearts. We've seen the videos and heard the testimonies of men and women who will not give up Christ when a blade is at their throat. We are not worthy to carry their sandals, yet we come up with excuses on why we can't preach the gospel here.

3. We should be praying for those brothers and sisters. They are on the frontlines and we're not. They're the ones fighting the gates of hell. We're living in the comforts of our world, looking at our watches, wondering when the sermon is going to be done. They're living it. We should seek ways to allow our faith to be so on fire that we might cause a stir in the world around us. Pray that way for a while; that one will hurt. "Lord, I want to live in such a way that it might cause the peaceful world I live in to be stirred up."

Persecution seeks to stop the gospel

Paul says in verse 16 that they were hindered from speaking the gospel. We'll learn next week from verse 18 that Satan was literally hindering them from preaching the message. What's the purpose of persecution? To silence the message of Christ. It isn't about you; it isn't about me. It's about Christ. They're angry with Christ, not us. So when you get turned away because of your beliefs in Christ, don't take it personally. It's Jesus they're upset with. They're angry with Him. They're seeking a way to keep people from hearing the gospel.

But as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, here's where God uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the strong. In the early part of the second century—about 100 years after Thessalonians was written—Tertullian wrote this to a Roman official while imprisoned: "The more we are mowed down by you, the more in number we grow. The blood of Christian martyrs is the seed that grows the church."

When Nero was throwing Christians to the lions in the coliseum, that's when the most expansive growth occurred in all of the church. That's crazy! "Come and be a follower of Jesus Christ and guess what you get, Bob! What do we have for you? You risk being fed to the lions! Enjoy that!" And they did it with gladness in their hearts. What an amazing testimony! Even though the Devil seeks to destroy us through persecution, God says the church will only grow.

Persecution causes God to store up His wrath

At the end of our passage, verse 16 says, "*...so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!*" If we were the Thessalonians, we would want to get our revenge. People are coming at us. We need to do something. "Let's go after them! Let's attack them!" But Paul reminds them that revenge is the Lord's; He will repay. The verse tells us that every harmful act and difficult word that they speak against Christ is filling up God's cup of wrath. When it reaches its full measure God will take that cup and pour it back on the individuals who did them.

There's speculation on when this happened. There was a famine in Judea during the times when 1 Thessalonians was written. Thousands of people lost their lives. Some believe that was the wrath that would take place. Others believe it was an action by Rome where hundreds, maybe thousands, of people were killed in the streets of Jerusalem. But I agree with most commentators who believe that the wrath that has come upon them would take place some 20 years after Paul wrote this letter. In A.D. 70 Rome came after the Jewish people with upheaval and rebellion. They brought their greatest general into the streets of Jerusalem with one command from Caesar: "Don't let one rock stand on top of another. Destroy the city and destroy everyone in it." The streets and the people of Jerusalem were destroyed.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. For those who are hearing the sound of my voice today and thwarting the will and plans of God, God says you may get your way today but you won't get away with it in the end. What a testimony for us that when we endure hardships and struggles, we can know that God is in control, He has a plan and so we are to walk worthy.

When the sea was tossing us to and fro last week, it was hard to walk. But once we got our balance, we got more comfortable in our circumstances and more grounded. God says the way we grow comfortable with trials and tribulations is by getting into the Word of God so that when they come we're ready to walk in a way that's worthy of God.

How do we apply this? We go to the Lord and ask Him to speak to us like He's never spoken before. Better yet, we should listen like we've never listened before so that we may know that whatever God brings our way is for our good, and God will use it to expand His Kingdom. Walking worthy is a life that is grounded on the Word of God.

Is that true of you and me today? Let's meditate on that this week.