

# Suffering for the Gospel (13.6.1985)

by Nigel Lee

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*Paul's sermon emphasizes the importance of faithfulness in ministry, trusting in God's sovereignty and provision, and the power of the gospel to soften people's hearts.*

**Duration:** 57:55

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 2:1

**Topics:** "Suffering"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the importance of being a good example as a parent and as a Christian. He emphasizes the role of parents in shaping the lives of their children and encourages them to live lives worthy of God. The speaker also highlights the need to evaluate one's own message and behavior and have a balanced view of achievements. He concludes by reminding the audience of the power of God's word and its ability to transform lives.

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## Transcript

Paul's second epistle, I'm sorry, first epistle to the Thessalonians chapter two. Going to read together from this great epistle. I'd like to read 16 verses with you, do follow in your own bible.

What a man Paul was, what great things he went through, how much we owe him. All those doctrines that have set us free in our consciences, most of them brought to us through the apostle Paul. I remember Richard Wernbrandt coming to an OM conference years ago, peeling off his shirt and we could see some of the scars, the broken bones in his body because of what he'd suffered for Christ.

Paul could do much the same, scars all over his body as he served the Lord Jesus. He spoke of the shipwrecks he'd gone through, the shipwrecks that he had suffered, the times that he'd been stoned, the times that he'd been beaten, all the time carrying in his heart that gospel which was going to set eventually us free to serve the Lord Jesus. Let's listen to him now as he writes, it's for us.

I will read eight verses and you read the next eight, down to verse 16. You know brothers, one Thessalonians 2, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you, on the contrary. We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We're not trying to please men, but God who tests our hearts.

You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed, God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you, not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Oh God, our dear heavenly Father, this evening is before us and it's your evening. We've come here into this meeting, it's your meeting.

We believe that you are here. Open our ears, turn our ears into eyes that we may see Jesus. Speak to us, Lord, those things that we need this night before we go.

Encourage and strengthen the fearful. Lord, bend low those that are proud. Pour your grace into our hearts, that we may again experience that miracle in our lives of your word, working in our hearts to bring your grace.

For Jesus Christ's sake, amen. We're not going to be too long tonight. I just want to look through the verses that we've read together with you.

Start of a chapter, Paul is looking back on recent history. You remember how he had gone into Thessalonica. He'd only spent three weeks there.

It had been little more than the amount of time that some of you are going to spend in the towns or the cities where you go. There's only a small team for this three-week visit, just Paul and Silas. Team leader, assistant team leader, that was it.

No treasurer, no driver, no literature man, no girls leader, just Paul and Silas. And in Acts 17, you can read the story of what happened in that visit. You might just turn back there.

In Acts 17, verse 2, Paul went into the synagogue. That was usually his starting point among the religious people until they threw him out. And in verse 3, he preached, focusing on two things.

Our gospel is unchanged. You focus on the necessity for the crucifixion and the reality of the resurrection. He explained and he proved that the Christ had to suffer and had to rise from the dead.

And there were some conversions, verse 4. A few of the Jews, not many of them. And quite a number of the Greeks. And a good number of prominent women.

It makes me smile, that does. I wonder how prominent they remained in this church. What a collection, they believed God.

God met them. Jews, Greeks, people from high social backgrounds, low social backgrounds. And in verse 5, there was a mob and they started a riot.

And they went round to the house where Paul and Silas were staying. And Paul and Silas weren't in. They were out doing door-to-door work somewhere.

And so this mob beat up the man in whose house they were living. What an incredible situation. The poor man had given a little bit of hospitality to Paul and in three weeks time, he gets beaten up in the streets for doing it.

And in verse 10, we see that after that great riot, as soon as it was night, Paul and Silas were sent away. That was it. Three weeks.

Big riot. And a church was left behind. They didn't know very much, but they knew the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Paul then has to move on to Berea. But he's looking back at his ministry in Thessalonica. Now what would be in your heart? Are you like the Apostle Paul? You've gone in and you've preached.

And a church has been born. And then there's been a big public riot and you've been thrown out. Some of us would immediately start writing our paperback book or we'd make a video about the great things God was doing.

Paul sits down and he thinks back over his ministry. He evaluates what he has done there in Thessalonica. And as we go through the chapter, we hear him just thinking through, what did I preach? How did I live? What did I say? Was it really worthy of the Lord who called me? Actually the whole incident in Thessalonica is remarkable.

Because he had just previously been beaten in Philippi, the last town he was in almost. You remember how they went into Philippi and they got into trouble with the magistrates. There'd been a riot there and then they were publicly flogged, put in prison.

And they were singing in the middle of the night, singing praises to God at midnight. The whole prison collapsed around them. This was the start of the evangelization of Europe.

Obstacles, difficulties, imprisonment, riots, prisons collapsing. Part one, the difficulties. Part two, God intervening.

The magistrates had apologized in Philippi but also kicked them out of the city. And a new church had been born there too. It only consisted of three people when he left.

A wealthy oriental businesswoman, a sturdy Roman jailer, and a Greek girl out of whom Paul had just cast demons. Not much is it? And then he gets thrown out. He may have felt perhaps his work there was rather superficial.

He goes on to the next place and he only lasts three weeks there. He might have been tempted to look back at what he's done and said, well I don't know, I wasn't really there long enough to really do anything. And yet we see God sovereignly in control in all of these situations.

Even through the opposition. Do you expect opposition this coming summer? How will you take it? Let's just think about that first for a few minutes. Are you prepared for it? When the Lord gathered his disciples together in John chapter 16, he warned them that they would be persecuted.

I am saying these things to you, he says, so that when it happens you will not stumble. Supposing people in the city where you go, rise up in wrath against you. Supposing you get persecution or trouble or difficulty from gangs of folk in the areas where you go.

What happens if the life of the believers is made very difficult because of the evangelism that's going on in that town? Opposition never ever has crushed the church of God. Error, untruth, complacency, they are the things that have destroyed the church of God in centuries gone by. You remember how in Acts chapter 4 they threatened the apostles with death if they carried on preaching the gospel? And Peter said, well what are we going to do? Are we going to obey God or you? They went back and gathered all the believers together.

Acts chapter 4. They said, look they have threatened us with severe reprisals, great punishments if we go on preaching this gospel. Now let's have a prayer meeting. All gathered together to pray.

Lord, you know the situation. Now Lord, help us to tread very carefully through this minefield that we're in. Lord, we don't want to cause too much trouble.

Lord, help us to be very careful and to keep our heads down for a while. Lord, don't let anything happen that will be at all nasty. Lord, we're almost sorry we got into this situation.

Is that what they prayed in Acts chapter 4? They said, Lord, you've heard what these men have said. You are God the creator. You are the God who works in the hearts of men.

Now God give us a double dose of boldness to go back and preach the same thing all over again. We expect human and even satanic opposition. But who is in you? Will you tell me? Is he greater than he that is in the world? Are you sure that God is in control? Then don't sit there looking as if you're terrified by everything I've said so far tonight.

I mean you see a great Goliath coming towards you. What are you going to do? There's two reactions to Goliath. There's the reaction of Saul.

He's so big. I must go. And there's the reaction of David.

Oh, he's so big. I can't miss. It's a difference of perspective.

May God fill us with his perspective even as we face opposition and struggle. The Paul says, well, I arrived there in Thessalonica. My back was still bleeding from the insults and suffering I'd had in Philippi.

But with the help of our God we dare to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. It's a great thing to stand on somebody's doorstep and to know that God is standing there with you. Even if they slam the door at least get a smile in first.

Just love them a little for Christ's sake. When you begin to get a conversation going you know God is there working. You'll often go door-to-door in twos.

Well the job of the person who's not talking is to pray. Not kneeling down or bleating the doorpost or just smiling and praying. And God is also there with you on every single doorstep this summer.

Even when the dogs come. God is at work. Paul looks back on trouble, on suffering, on persecution, opposition, and he says, you know, the amazing thing was God was working throughout it all.

With God's help we dared to share the gospel. Yet you know it's right to evaluate what we do, to think back over our message and our behavior, to have a balanced view of what has been achieved. You know sometimes people come home from OM and to hear them talk you'd think, you know, raging revival had

broken out all over the continent.

Other people come home and to hear them talk you think it was all an utter waste of time. And I want to prepare you now, even though there may be difficulty, for a balanced view of what are your goals and what will be your achievements. If you're involved in a work with God don't ever diminish it in conversation afterwards.

Verses three and four he looks back over his message. What we said does not spring from error. What I said was true.

We must, we must be faithful in preaching the true gospel. Because I'll tell you this, the gospel has its own power to soften people's hearts. And the gospel creates a hunger for more of the gospel.

You may actually be meeting people at a very early stage of their spiritual life. They hardly know how to react. I've seen roomfuls of godless students in Britain, when they've heard the gospel for the first time they sit there almost as if a stun grenade has gone off.

But you share the gospel, you begin to penetrate people's consciences and you begin to create a little bit of a hunger for even more of it. Of course they won't show it outwardly very often, but that is what's actually going on inside their hearts. I remember working in India and there's a village in Rajasthan, a state in western India, it's called Tonk.

Every teen that ever went to Tonk got stoned. We'd stand at the back of this truck and preach, but we'd keep the driver near the front so he could jump in and drive off if it got, you know, too bad. People would destroy the literature that we had.

They'd throw cow dung at us. If we didn't go with that, they'd start to throw stones. Then they'd chase us with these great big long bamboo sticks, slappies they're called, and they hurt, I can tell you.

But the teens used to go back, go back again and again. It didn't last very long, but it would always go back. I was sent back to visit the teens in India some many years ago, calling on some of them in Rajasthan.

They said, we're going out in evangelism today, will you come with us and preach? I said, where are you going? And they said, Tonk. I thought, oh no Lord, Jesus mercy, I've come all this way and I'm going to get beaten up again. This was about four or five years, I think, or more, perhaps six, since I had last been there.

Do you know, it was amazing. We set out the literature at the back of the truck. We put the microphone up to preach the gospel.

We got the guitar out to sing. The crowd gathered as usual and I was really nervous. And they saw the gospels and the fight started, but it was between each other in order to get hold of the gospels.

Total turnaround. Now, I mean, they don't seem to be happy unless they're beating somebody up. They're now beating each other up in order to get hold of God's word for themselves.

Oh, it taught me such a lesson. You know, if you're faithful and you go on praying, and we prayed for that place every time we came away a bit, a bit, you know, bleeding. God begins to work in people's hearts.

So even in opposition, God is in control and you pray. Paul looks back and he says, well, I did preach the true gospel. My appeal did not spring from error, nor from impure motives, nor was I trying to trick anybody.

On the contrary, we lived in that town, in that village. You will live under God's evaluation. John Stott has said this, fundamental God-centeredness is the greatest quality in Christian ministry.

You can't do that, can you? Have a life that's centered absolutely on God. It's the most important quality in being a servant of the Lord. Has it come to the end of any day? You get ready to go to sleep.

Maybe you're tired. John Wesley used to make it his practice to look back every day, every day, and before he went to sleep, thank God for four things. He got robbed one day by a highwayman when he was on his way to preach the gospel in pouring rain into some town.

The man took everything he had, he sat down at the end of the day to praise God. He thanked God that he hadn't had much money in the first place. He thanked God that he hadn't been killed.

He thanked God that the robber hadn't taken all his clothes. This was possible in the 18th century in England, and a naked evangelist doesn't get very far. And he thanked God that by God's grace, he was not the one doing the stealing.

Learning to think positively, even in difficulties. You come to the end of a day and you offer the day's work to the Lord Jesus. Every day of my Christian ministry, as I come to the end, I give what I've done to the Lord, and I ask for him to cover it with the blood of the Lord Jesus.

Because even in my best efforts, there have probably been false motives and inadequacies. You have a high priest, each of you, in heaven, standing at the right hand of God the Father, displaying his own blood by the eternal Spirit, in order to make acceptable to God your service and your work day by day. I find that very motivating.

The Lord says, I will take, I will forgive, I will use what you do. The Lord says at the end of each day, have you been seeking my approval in all that you've done? Have you been fighting with my weapons? 2 Corinthians 10, verse 4. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. 2 Corinthians chapter 4. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways.

We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And then he goes on to talk about the darkness that there is in the world, and how God is shining the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ into the darkness.

And then he goes on to talk about the treasure that we have in earthen pots. It brings Gideon to my mind. Remember the story of Gideon's little army? Not many of them with her, just 300, up against 135,000 Midianites in the valley.

And they had some very strange weapons that night, Gideon's army had. They had an earthenware pot, and they had some light to shine out into the darkness. There wasn't a sword between them.

They stood all around the outer edge of the camp of the Midianites, each chap with his pot and his torch, in the darkness. And one would say to another, here, have you brought your sword? I haven't got it with me. I can't hold it, I've got these two things, a pot and a torch.

I haven't got a dagger, nothing at all. Well how are we going to defeat the Midianites with clay pots and a torch? I don't know. Gideon told me to do it.

It's very strange. Even if I hit one Midianite with a pot, it'll only break, and that's me finished then. Then all the light will come out, and they'll see where to get me.

Let's keep quiet, what else are we going to do? Wait for Gideon. Gideon suddenly blew a trumpet and shouted, the sword of the Lord and of Gideon, and the earthenware vessels were broken. And as they began to break, so the light began to shine out.

Paul says we have this treasure, the gospel, in earthen pots. Sometimes we get broken, sometimes we get persecuted, sometimes we are struck down, but the light is shining out in the darkness. God is accomplishing his purposes through his own weaponry.

God has chosen the weak things of this world to confound the mighty. He deliberately collects together the foolish people in order to bring down the wise. You've met your team this afternoon.

What was your first reaction? You think that perhaps one or two of them looked a bit weak, and the odd one, a bit foolish, especially maybe the team leader. It may be so. And God has done it deliberately, because God is going to use you.

And maybe you'll find your own earthenware vessel gets a little bit broken and damaged and tired during the summer. The light of God's gospel will shine out into the darkness of people's hearts. The Lord will say, are you seeking my approval? Are you looking for my approval of him? And are you using my weapons? Because God has promised to use you.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul comments on the methods that he used. We never used flattery. We never put a mask on to cover up greed.

Nor are we looking for any praise from men. You know, let me comment on that last bit. We all need encouragement, don't we? We feel better when people say, well done.

Set yourself to be encouragers of others on the team. Appreciate. Tell them.

Tell them that their meal that they cooked was good. Tell them that something that they have done has really helped you. You know, even preachers like the odd word of encouragement now and again.

But we must all get along without it. We don't seek for the praise of men, says Paul. But it's very nice when Christians do seek to encourage you, isn't it? People may not congratulate you very much this summer.

Don't worry about it. But commit yourself to helping others to feel encouraged and strengthened because you're there. Paul then begins to talk in verse 7 about his ministry.

First thing he says is that we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. People are sometimes troubled, aren't they, by the apparent maleness of God in the Bible. God is always spoken of as masculine, it seems.

Now some people feel a little bit uncomfortable with that. Well, you know, both male and female are said in Genesis to be created in the image of God. I suspect the problem lies not in God, but in our ideas about what maleness and femaleness consist of.

God speaks of himself in scripture using what we may think are apparently female characteristics. God speaks of himself as nurturing little kids, children. God speaks of himself as being like a hen, a farmyard hen, gathering little chicks under his wing.

God speaks of himself as being like a woman who's lost some of the housekeeping or lost a bit of her treasure and she scours the house for it. Paul here speaks of himself as being gentle, like a nursing mother. Gentleness is nothing that men need to be ashamed of.

He says in verse 8 that he was affectionate. We gave you, he says, not just the gospel. He didn't just come to the doors to give you the gospel.

We gave you ourselves. Don't go out this summer just to give people a little sealed packet message. Give them your time, give them your love, give them your interest and your prayers.

Give them out of your own life. You know, some of you may be involved in the follow-up of new believers. A nursing mother feeds a baby from out of her own body.

The goodness of what flows into that baby depends on the quality of her own life and her own bloodstream. Now, how are you with God? Are you yourself feeding well? Are you spiritually strong and right with the Lord so that what flows out of you will be healthy and feeding for others? Paul says we were delighted to share with you not just the gospel, not just the message, but our own lives utterly. And then he goes on to talk about being like a mother with this.

Surely you remember our toil and our hardship. Mothers work pretty hard, you know. I can remember when my kids were very small.

They used to wake up in the night. My wife would get up and attend to them and I would hardly even know what was going on in the I remember my wife had been walking up and down with our little kid for about an hour, I think. And I woke up and I said, is there anything else I can do for you? To my mind that was completely logical.

Is there anything else that I can do for you? She nearly threw the baby at me. There was another occasion where I don't think I was even awake. The baby was crying and crying and my wife was trying to get the kid to go back to sleep.

I sat both upright in bed. I said, it's no good. She won't go to sleep.

Six-month-old baby, you see, yelling its head off. She won't go to sleep. She's not filled with the Holy Spirit.

I respect my wife for the work, the energy that she's put into those kids. Even when I make stupid remarks in my sleep. Paul calls the Thessalonians to remember.

He says, you remember how I was with you. I worked hard. Verse nine.

You remember, brothers, our toil, our hardship. We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone. Will people remember you on the team as a hard worker, a diligent worker? Is that one of the marks of your life? Or will they remember you as one of the lazy characters that seems to creep into them? People often say, go easy on yourself, don't they? Slow down.

You're doing too much. But I'm not sure whether that's what we need always. Paul could look back and write to these Thessalonians and expect that they remembered the day in, day out, night in, night out, hard work that he'd put into evangelism.

So it may be hot where you're going, and your feet may ache, and you've got, you know, more streets to go down. Remember, the Lord is going with you to every doorstep. Remember, you walk in the footsteps of others who have worked hard for the gospel's sake.

And then in verse 11, Paul says, you know that we dealt with each of you like a father. Just as a father encourages his kids. I used to be a school teacher.

I used to watch the fathers turn up to watch their sons play football. They're these little 11, 12 year old boys running around kicking a football. And these crazy fanatical dads at the side of the pitch.

And the boy can make a complete ass of himself. I mean, he's really, really useless footballer. The father can't see it at all.

Go on son, keep going. Oh well, you'll become a father one day. He's not playing football.

No, no. He's still crying in the night, is he? Yeah, yeah. Fathers encourage their kids.

Will you be an encourager? It was my son's sports day this afternoon back in England. And I didn't want to be here. In the father's heart, there's encouragement.

There's comfort. There's example. He's urging his children to live lives worthy of God.

Two examples, the mother and the father. People producing people. And it all depends on their own life.

You lay a foundation, you launch another life. It depends on you. Paul could look back over his own ministry and say, you know, I was gentle.

I was hard working. I was encouraging. I was a good example.

Will you be able to do that this summer? And then finally, from verse 13 to 16, we come to the conclusion of the passage. We thank God continually. When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God.

This just comes over my heart, you know. What grace of God, that he could take six feet, 1.8 meters of clay, and speak into us, breathe his life into us, and speak out through us. That we might be helped to speak such words that mean the difference between eternal life and eternal destruction for those that hear.

Have you found God's word touching you at all during this conference? Anything, anything warmed your heart? Paul says here, that word which is actually working in you, the very word that has been working in

your heart this conference, is the same word that you're going to distribute. You sensed any of its power? God will do the same through the scriptures that you distribute. In the closing verses of our section, he points to some of the results of the word of God working in people's hearts.

Verse 14, you became imitators of God's churches in Judea. The love and the sharing that went on in Judea. You also became willing to suffer, because God's word was at work.

Every new beginning in people's lives that's going to last, it comes from the word of God. Every new beginning for God in any little town or hamlet or village around Europe, it comes from the word of God. Any fresh movement among God's people, it starts with God's word.

You're going to stand on people's doorsteps with scriptures, a book that's already changing you, and convicting you, and helping you. There's life, there's power in the word of God. That's why Paul could stand and take so much suffering.

That was why he was so anxious, that what he proclaimed was really God's gospel truth. That's why he wanted his whole life and ministry to commend the word of God to people, that in God's holy word lies the power that's going to transform lives and transform Europe. Never ever allow yourself to be involved in a movement that believes in distributing the word of God, but you yourself have got no time personally to read it.

I challenged you last night to believe in the biblical doctrine of the reality of hell. Strong stuff. And we saw from scripture that we could only absorb that doctrine into our mind if we were prepared to be filled with God's holy spirit.

These are some of the central truths that we want to say to you this summer. Dear people, I want to urge you from the bottom of my heart that you become men and women of God's word. Don't try to worship God without putting fuel on the fire with scripture in your hearts as you go.

Learn to feed on scripture, that you might be stronger in the word of God at the end of the summer than you are at the beginning. Learn to trust God's word as you distribute it, as you quote it, as you go. That in these closing years of the 20th century, God again might, through his word, do a great thing in our lives and in our homes, in our churches.

Let's pray and ask God to make us men and women of his book. We thank you, O God, that you go with us, each team, tomorrow. That as we pack away our Bibles in our cases, we have there that which will feed us and sustain us and direct us.

As we load our book bags with scripture and other books, we go out to give people the bread of life. Help us, Lord, to meditate on your word. Direct us in what we should say from scripture as we get into conversation with the needy and the lost.

Lord, start new things in our lives, in our understanding through your word. Grant, O God, in the months and the years ahead that new churches, new Christian families come into being because of the power of your word. Lord, we don't trust our own effort, we don't trust our own smiling faces, we trust the power of your word, your gospel.

Lord, we know that your sword is too edged. Help us to feel its sharpness, even as we go out to wield it. We pray for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Let's just sing again, man shall not live by bread alone.

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Alleluia, alleluia. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Alleluia, alleluia.

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