

New Hope Sermon Strong Opposition June 25, 2017

In First Thessalonians ch. 2 Paul acknowledges to the Thessalonians that they preached the gospel to them “in spite of strong opposition.” As Christians living for God in a world controlled by evil, we will face “strong opposition” - sometimes from our own families or friends, sometimes by the powers in nations and communities that are motivated by motives of self or greed or slander or corruption, sometimes by the forces of evil themselves. Strong opposition – that assaults our reputation, may threaten our security or our livelihood, our health, – our very well-being, as Paul and the Thessalonians faced.

Strong opposition for converts often comes first from their families.

I certainly resonate with all our students who have made commitments to Jesus and faced mild to severe parental opposition as a result. When I declared my new faith in Jesus as a college student, my parents slandered both me and my Christ. They disparaged anyone who would need the “crutch” of religion and accused me of joining a cult and of adolescent ignorance. “You will soon outgrow this stage,” they said. And they made some efforts to be sure I did. They refused to talk about “religion” and pushed back strongly against any efforts I made to share what Jesus meant to me and the life change I was beginning to experience. “You were baptized in the church. Wasn’t our religious upbringing (which in fact did not exist) sufficient? We raised you better than this.” For many younger converts, this is very familiar territory. Any of you have stories like this?

Most of the Thessalonians who became Christians under Paul faced this kind of opposition. Paul commended them (vs. 14) in how they endured the suffering in hope that came “*from your own countrymen*”—the same things the churches in Judea suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.

Other opposition occurs on many other levels. Paul’s concern for these young believers is *that “no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them.”* (1 Thess. 3:3). The NLT translates “unsettled” as “disturbed.” The image is of the churning up of water, changing the environment from peace and tranquility to anxiousness and doubt. Paul is concerned that the Thessalonians not lose their faith, that their foot does not slip. He says he is worried that *the tempter had tempted you* (1 Thess. 3:5) and they had turned away from God. Persecution is discouraging especially when it comes from your own people, your neighbors, friends, your business associates. Discouragement, doubt, hopelessness, and anxiety might all have been ways the tempter was tempting these new, young Christians. But Paul was greatly encouraged that *“you are standing firm in the Lord; that they evidenced endurance through their hope of Jesus’ return.”*

This leads me to 3 application questions for our own lives:

- (1) So what unsettles us?
- (2) When we face strong opposition or suffering, how does Satan work in our minds, and bodies, and families to cause us to lose our footing?
- (3) And, how has God helped you as He helped the Thessalonians in their persecution?

I want to take a minute and let you think through the answers to those questions in your own life.

There are several Scriptures which God has used in my life in these months when I have felt physically under siege and the house itself has also been under siege with burst pipes, drainage and driveway issues that will cost thousands of dollars.

Psalm 94:18-19 “*When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your unfailing love, LORD, supported me. ¹⁹ When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.*”

Psalm 18:16-19 “He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. ¹⁷ He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. ¹⁸ They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the LORD was my support. ¹⁹ He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.”

Psalm 118:13-15 “I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me ¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. ¹⁵ Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: “The LORD’s right hand has done mighty things!”

Psalm 116:1-3, 6-9 “I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ² Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. ³ The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. The LORD protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me. ⁷ Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you. ⁸ For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, ⁹ that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”

God is present with His people and will be our shield, our help and our support in the midst of trouble. The New Testament is also clear that persecution and problems can build character and maturity of our faith (James 1:2-4, Romans 5:3-5). Interestingly, the writers say “*count it all joy, rejoice in our sufferings. Rejoice as we participate in Christ’s sufferings.*” The Lord also uses our suffering so we can experience God’s comfort and pass that on to someone else in their suffering (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

The Bible is incredibly contemporary in its application. So let me share several examples of how the issues of strong opposition have been encountered today by Christians.

1. Sometimes strong opposition comes from within the faith community. Alex Ihama from Africa writes: “I have seen far too many Christians being persecuted by fellow Christians simply to justify their respective opinions. They are furious about the speck in the eyes of a fellow Christian that they forgot about the log in theirs. They judge a Christian so harshly, even more than they would judge unbelievers and the devil.

They spread rumors and gossips about the pains and hurts of another Christian instead of praying and fasting for them. They want to be right so much that they forget that being righteous is more important in the eyes of God. They would give sacrificially to the unknown while, to their knowledge, a fellow Christian struggles to feed his family.”

2. On the global stage: “Open Doors defines *persecution* as any hostility experienced as a result of identification with Christ. Christians remain one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world, it stated. Christians throughout the world continue to risk imprisonment, loss of home and assets, torture, beheadings, rape and even death as a result of their faith.” So let’s take a closer look:

“For the third year in a row, the modern persecution of Christians worldwide has hit another record high. But the primary cause, Islamic extremism, now has a rival: ethnic nationalism. Thus, Asia increasingly merits concern alongside the Middle East, according to the 2017 World Watch List (WWL). The annual list examines the pressures faced by Christians in five spheres of life (private, family, community, national, and church), plus levels of religiously motivated violence, in order to rank the top 50 countries where Christians face the most persecution. [See graphic]

The findings and trends noted by Open Doors are stark:

- Approximately 215 million Christians experience high, very high, or extreme persecution.
- North Korea remains the most dangerous place to be a Christian (for 14 straight years).

- Islamic extremism remains the global dominant driver of persecution, responsible for initiating oppression and conflict in 35 out of the 50 countries on the 2017 list.
- Ethnic nationalism is fast becoming a major driver of persecution. “In Asia it took an anti-minorities form, fueled by dramatic religious nationalism and government insecurity. It is common—and easy—for tottering governments to gain quick support by scapegoating Christians.”
- The killings of Christians in Nigeria saw an increase of more than 62 percent.
- India rose to its highest rank ever, No. 15, amid the continued rise of Hindu nationalism. An average of 40 incidents were reported per month, including pastors beaten, churches burned and Christians harassed. Of the 64 million Christians in India, approximately 39 million experience direct persecution” (Jeremy Weber, ‘Worst Year Yet’: The Top 50 Countries Where It’s Hardest to Be a Christian, Christianity Today, January 11, 2017).

3. There is also such a thing as “soft persecution.” From Australia comes this current report: ““In Australia, at the moment, there is ‘A *thin veneer* of resentment toward Christianity on top of a sea of apathy!’ Christians are no longer just a moral minority. For many journalists and progressive activists, we are the new barbarians, enemies of the state. We have a situation where government is trying to legislate religious convictions out of religious organizations, where media outlets attempt to stereotype Christians as homophobic, and where activists are pushing to get opponents of same-sex marriage fired from their jobs. We are dealing with opposition that is powerful, punitive, and predatory—opposition meant to purge Christians from the public square and pressure them to change their beliefs. Whatever monasteries we build, metaphorical or real, they will not be safe from an overreaching state or from progressive activists. For example, in 2015, the Catholic Archbishop of Hobart, Julian Porteous, issued a pamphlet to the parents of children in Catholic schools explaining the Catholic church’s position on same-sex marriage. The pamphlet was very pastoral and lacked anything incendiary. Yet a Greens political candidate and transgender activist, Martine Delaney, lodged a complaint with the state’s anti-discrimination commissioner, and the commissioner agreed that the archbishop had a case to answer. With a federal election looming, the complaint was withdrawn, but it was concerning to find a Catholic bishop facing prosecution for disseminating Catholic beliefs to Catholics.

Then in 2017, less than a week after police thwarted a plot by jihadists to attack St. Paul’s Cathedral in Melbourne, The Age’s Chris Johnston complained, with the horror of a housewife discovering a rat in the pantry, that not only are the city’s eastern suburbs infested with Christians, but many of them even hold office in local councils. Johnston particularly attacked Casey Council’s Coptic Christian Mayor Sam Aziz and even identified the Christian school that his children attended. Johnston’s article was not a piece of investigative journalism benignly describing the religious demographics of eastern Melbourne. His obvious intention was to prejudice his readers, manufacturing outrage that Coptic Christians are holding political office.”

From within Australia, Michael Bird, a lecturer in theology at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia advocates a counter-cultural campaign against political progressives, which he calls the Thessalonian Strategy. “The name comes from the complaint made about Paul and his colleagues while in Thessalonica: *‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus’* (Acts 17:6–7, NRSV, emphasis mine). By itself, ‘turning the world upside down’ can sound like an empty slogan. So how might the Thessalonian Strategy work in practice? I foresee a two-pronged approach.

First, this strategy entails love of neighbor as the defining theme. The Thessalonian Strategy means advocating for a cultural pluralism where all religions are free and all people respected. We have to show that we are the ones who believe in tolerance, diversity, and respect. We demonstrate the

sincerity of this commitment by *listening* rather than silencing our opponents; *explaining* rather than demonizing; *affirming* people's right to be different rather than demanding uniformity; and *turning* the other cheek when assaulted by activists....

But alongside love of neighbor, this strategy also involves a robust challenge to the legitimacy of secular militancy. We have to be prepared to resist the new legal structures being erected around us, bait political progressives into revealing the predatory nature of their ideology, contest restrictions on religious liberty, and disrupt the secular narrative that religion is inherently bad for the state. To avoid being driven out of education and charitable work, to prevent our voices from being muted, and to stop our sermons from being subpoenaed, we have to wage a war of sorts, but one armed with the weapons of peace and pluralism. We have to be willing to expose secular progressive bullying, hypocrisy, intolerance, and fanaticism.

Remember, the center of gravity for secular progressives is the belief that they occupy the moral high ground. So our strategy needs to expose how this movement has come to represent silencing, threatening, humiliating, and penalizing those who do not share progressive values. It must be pointed out that the new tolerance looks like some manifestations of the old tyrannies" (Michael Bird, *Turning the World Upside Down, Down Under*, Christianity Today, June 14, 2017).

4. And finally, the book I am reviewing for next week is called *They say they are Infidels: On the Run from Isis with Persecuted Christians in the Middle East*. Here's one of the many stories: "In 2005, there already had been at least 27 attacks on Christians in Iraq by the time Pastor Mahur and his companions disappeared. In 2004, there had been 63 separate attacks on Christians in Iraq...A coordinated attack on 6 churches during Sunday evenings services on August 1, 2004 had served notice on all the churches in Iraq. At 6 in the evening, explosions tore through 4 churches in Bagdad and one in Mosul, killing 8 Christians attending worship services and 5 Muslim passersby on the street. The blast injured about 60 others....The churches were heavily damaged, their windows and doors had been smashed and one of the church's building was partially collapsing. Glass had sprayed into nearby homes, parked cars had erupted in flames, and massive plumes of smoke rose into the air. Fellow worshipers crawled over the wreckage in search of Bibles, crosses on necklaces, and other tokens to identify the scattered remains of the dead....Now fear arose with the disappearance of the core leadership at St. George's, at that time the largest Protestant church in Iraq. The loss of such an exuberant leadership devastated what had so recently been a dynamic reemerging church scene. Bagdad's churches came together to fast for 3 days and pray for Mahur and the others' safe return. Nebil held onto hope that the 5 had been kidnapped, not killed or taken in for questioning by soldiers. But as the days dragged on, no one demanded ransom, and no evidence surfaced that they had been detained or killed. They had vanished....By 2006, Iraqi Christians who had voted in the polls in 2005, were now voting with their feet. By some estimates, 40,000 Christians left Iraq in 2006....At the U.S. State Department, John Hanford told me, 'The United States doesn't want to see ancient Christian communities fleeing,' but he added, 'we don't think there is a wave of violence against Christians. It's inadvertently happening as a result of the overall situation.' The numbers seem to indicate he was right. But the stories the Christians told—of churches bombed, threat letters received, businesses attacked, and neighbors emptying did not" (Mindy Belz, *They say they are Infidels: On the Run from Isis with Persecuted Christians in the Middle East*, Baker Books, 2016, pp. 86-87, 99-100).

To make this even more painfully relevant Headlines on June 23 were: "More than 100 Iraqi Christians arrested in immigration raids earlier this month will get to stay in the United States—at least for another two weeks, according to an order issued yesterday by a federal judge in Detroit. Judge Mark Goldsmith halted the immediate deportation of the recently detained Iraqi nationals for 14 days, while he decides whether the district court or an immigration court has jurisdiction over their case, [Hamama v. Adducci](#). The court [described](#) their plight: Petitioners state that because of their having resided in the United States and their status as religious minorities—many are Christian, others are members of oppressed Muslim sects—they are likely to be persecuted, tortured, or killed by

members of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the de facto government in many parts of Iraq. The written order follows outcry from the Detroit area's Chaldean Christians, who were shocked when officials [detained scores of them](#) on June 11.

How do we counter all these areas of strong opposition, beloved?

We can work politically and provide strong opposition to the deportations of Christians to counter the strong opposition Trump's policies are having against these groups.

We can join the many groups like Voice of the Martyrs that is trying to bring worldwide attention and help to those in countries where persecution is great. Or groups like Iran Alive Ministries. Although Iran is #8 on the list as one of the top countries for persecution, there is a counter movement growing. In an interview posted June 21, 2017 between K.A. Ellis and Hormoz Shariat in 2016, the president and founder of Iran Alive Ministries. Ellis asked: "The Iranian church is seeing explosive growth, despite every effort to silence it. How is this?" Shariat: "There is a very special grace on Iranian Christians living inside Iran. Through satellite TV, we teach them to love their enemies and pray for them. We not only help persecuted and isolated Christians grow strong in faith and action, but we also teach them to share the gospel with their persecutors. I have many stories about how persecuted Iranian Christians love their persecutors. Many experience the presence and power of Jesus while in jail or when tortured. Our best underground house church leaders are women who were formerly oppressed and desperate but are now attracted to Christianity, where women are respected." This is a matter of praise but also intense prayer.

So we need to pray warfare prayers and fight Satan and all his forces who are bringing such suffering upon God's people. The Apostle Peter knew about the attacks of Satan personally after his own denial of Christ. He wrote to the believers suffering in the early church: I Pet. 5:8-9 - **8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.** Suffering in all its forms is what all Christians face. We all are called to resist the goals of the enemy who wants to unsettle us through suffering.

Then we need to claim God's restoration through the suffering process: **10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.**

Amen, indeed. So let's close in a song of faith sung in times of trial and then claim the scriptures God brings as we go to prayer for those facing persecution around the world today.

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