

Joy in Affliction

Isaiah 29:17–24, 1 Thessalonians 1:6–8

The apostle Paul is writing a letter to the church at Thessalonica. This is a church that he himself planted. He has deep love for the people into whose lives he had poured much labor. He is especially happy to hear that they remain true to the Lord and are growing in their faith. He thanks God for them and prays for them. He remembers their good works that flowed from a true faith, which is evidence of their divine election. The fact that these men and women were drawn to the Word, even though Paul and his party were unknown and their message was opposed by the local synagogue officials, was evidence that they were born again. Paul didn't have name recognition, a well-oiled advance team, endorsements by civic leaders, celebrities sitting on his platform, big-name musicians performing at his meetings, or earthly fame and glory. All he had was the Word—but to the person who is born-again, that is enough. The true church is born of the Word, based on the Word, governed by the Word, defined by the Word and preaches the Word. Paul would testify: “My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”¹ And in the case of the elect, that is sufficient!

I have four points this morning: A Christian is *a follower of Christ; a follower of men who proclaim Christ; a receiver of the word; an echoer of the word*. First, a Christian is:

1. A follower of Christ

Paul writes, “You became followers of *us* and of the *Lord*.” Let's take these in reverse order. First, a Christian is a follower of the Lord, that is, of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ is the Lord. He is Lord of all. Here is the message that Peter delivered to the household of Cornelius: “the word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—*He is Lord of all*” (Acts 10:36). The goal of all creation is “that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is *Lord*, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11).

“Lord” means, simply, he is boss! Peter states that wives ought to be “submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him *lord*.” Sarah called Abraham “lord” (with a small “l”), and she gave evidence of this by obeying him as the head of the home. It is the divine plan that wives be submissive to their own husbands, as to the Lord. A godly wife discovers that things go better in their marriage if she does that. Of course, in our egalitarian society this idea is scoffed at—it is regarded as demeaning to the woman, a violation of her personhood and dignity. But Sarah was a classy lady, a helpmeet to Abraham, the

¹ 1 Cor. 2:4

father of the faithful. Easton points out that she lived 127 years: “the only instance in Scripture where the age of a woman is recorded.” But Christians submit to the Lord (capital “L”). If you are a follower of the Lord, that means that you submit to him, obey him. The Bible is called “the word of Christ.” Whatever the Bible commands is the word of Christ—God’s perfect will. If Christ tells us not to do something, then the follower of Christ refrains from doing it. If Christ tells us to do something, then the follower of Christ does it. We are not merely to *talk* about obeying him, but actually to obey him. “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. . . . hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him” (1 John 3:18–19).

We are to be followers of Christ. The word “followers” is actually *imitators* (μιμηταί), mimics. When we think of a mimic, we think of a child imitating a parent—such as a young child putting on dress-up clothes and playing make-believe, going through the motions without clearly understanding all that is involved. But God wants us to imitate Christ with understanding. “I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Cor. 14:15).

Elsewhere the apostle Paul writes, “Be imitators (μιμηταί) of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Eph. 5:1–2). As Christ gave himself for us, so we ought to give ourselves to him in the service of others. We are to be imitators of Christ.

The Dutch Roman Catholic priest Thomas à Kempis wrote the classic devotional book *The Imitation of Christ* in the early 1400s. *The Imitation of Christ* emphasizes the interior life, withdrawal from the world, and devotion to the Eucharist as the key element of spiritual life.² While the emphasis on Christ—rather than the Virgin Mary—is commendable, it must be noted that Christ himself didn’t withdraw from the world but ate and drank with publicans and sinners, though he did it always with exemplary purity, self-discipline and perfect command of every situation. Christ does not say, “Withdraw from the world” but “Be not conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2)—“Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold”³: don’t adopt the world’s way of thinking. The Bible tells us how to think: “casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, [and] bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Yes, we are to obey Christ. Some naively think that if they adopt the world’s way of thinking they will have greater influence—but it will not be the influence of Christ.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Imitation_of_Christ accessed 11-18-23, spelling Americanized; <https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1653/pg1653-images.html> accessed 11-18-23

³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%2012%3A1-2&version=PHILLIPS> accessed 11-18-23

Second, a Christian is

2. A follower of men who proclaim Christ

Note Paul's words again: "you became followers of *us* and of the Lord." Who is the "us"? Paul and his associates: men who preached Christ. Men who faithfully preach Christ with Christ's authority. Obviously, there is a difference between Christ's *divine* authority and the preacher's *derived* authority. The preacher has Christ's authority only insofar as he faithfully represents Christ. If he preaches and teaches the Bible, he has Christ's authority. If he preaches and teaches purely human opinions, he does *not* have Christ's authority. This standard is the same for all ministers of Christ, no matter what denomination, no matter what the man's rank or reputation, or how long (or how recently) it has been since he was ordained.

The Christian is to be discerning; he must search the Scriptures to verify that a particular teaching is in conformity with God's truth. But do not miss the significance of Paul's inspired word: "you became followers of *us* and of the Lord." The apostle is saying that the Thessalonian saints were giving evidence of true faith by being followers (imitators) of the men who risked their lives by bringing them the message of Christ. They were to honor their fathers in the faith just the way they were to honor their earthly fathers.

And so it is with us as well. A Christian is a follower of men who proclaim Christ. All of us need good role models; we all need to see the faith modeled before us. The essence of biblical evangelism is discipleship—modeling. A disciple is a follower. Christ's earthly disciples followed him around for three and a half years, walking with him, talking with him, eating with him, serving as his helpers, listening to his teaching. Wouldn't you love to have been among them—a witness of Christ's earthly ministry! But God's will is for the Christian faith to be modeled by men ordained and sent out by the church: evangelists, teachers, ministers, ruling elders, deacons. The church's ordained officers have a solemn responsibility to model Christ in their personal life and ministry. Their speech should be Christlike, their interactions with people should be Christlike, their domestic life should be Christlike. Ordained men who obstinately fail to model Christ in their character and actions should be disciplined by the church, and deposed from office if they fail to reform.

Non-ordained men and boys, women and girls are to model Christ as well. The disciple is to be like his teacher.⁴

So Paul says, "you became followers of *us* and of the Lord." Calvin points out that there is an Old Testament precedent for this. When the Israelites, having safely crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, saw the Egyptians who pursued them dead

⁴ Matt. 10:24–25, Luke 6:40

upon the seashore, Exodus records that “Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the LORD, and *believed the LORD, and his servant Moses*” (Ex. 14:31). Note that the people of Israel “believed the LORD, *and his servant Moses.*” This expression does not mean that Moses assisted the LORD in performing the miracle, but that Moses had faithfully represented the LORD to the people, and had thereby earned the people’s confidence and respect. God had done a great miracle, and Moses was to be credited with having spoken truly and accurately about the God of heaven. Thirdly, a Christian is

3. A receiver of the word

Paul testifies: “you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction.” The word “received” can also mean “welcomed”: you *welcomed* the word.⁵ It is used of Christ: “When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he *welcomed* them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:11). The Lord Jesus was a gracious host, and he remains such, welcoming his people to the Lord’s table. Moreover, the church looks forward to the day when the saints will be welcomed into heaven itself, and will sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

It is possible to receive something without welcoming it, such as a summons to appear in court, or a letter from the IRS informing you that you owe more taxes. But the word that is used here implies that the Thessalonian Christians *welcomed* the Word with eagerness and relish, as David prayed, when he was in the wilderness of Judah: “O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul *thirsteth* for thee, my flesh *longeth* for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is” (Ps. 63:1). If your conscience has been awakened to your sinfulness and your need of Christ, then your soul will welcome the gospel, the good news that *Christ saves sinners*; it will be the best news ever. It will be more important to you than anything in this life: a hobby, an activity, a lover—anything! Your soul will say, “I need Jesus; he means all the world to me.” You will become a lover of Christ. His worship will become the most important thing to you. To be with God’s people—hearing his word, lifting up your voice in song—will be the most important activity in your life. The gospel story will be the sweetest thing to you.

The Thessalonian Christians welcomed the Word in much affliction. Acts 17 tells the story of how, when Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica, the unbelieving Jews became envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, gathered a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, where Paul and his fellow missionaries were staying, searching for them. And upon not finding them, they dragged Jason and some of the other converts to

⁵ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon: δέχομαι *receive someone into one’s house . . . receive as a guest, welcome* (Logos Bible Software)

the city rulers, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.” The unbelieving Jews instigated the populace to turn against the Christians. After this incident, the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away to Berea, but we are given no reason to believe that the persecution against the Christians stopped after Paul and Silas left. Rather, Paul’s comment about the Thessalonian Christians welcoming the Word in much affliction seems to imply that the troubles continued. Gill makes the point that the Thessalonian Christians’ reception of the word in much affliction is “*a considerable commendation of them, that at a time when others were offended and fell off from hearing the word, and a profession of the Gospel, they [received] it.*”

And so it is with you and me. If we receive and welcome the Gospel even if our friends and neighbors try to discourage us, that is a commendation of our faith. In Muslim and some Asian societies, men, women and children who come to faith in Christ come under intense pressure from their families to renounce the faith, lest they bring shame upon the family. Some are even kicked out of their homes and fired from their jobs if they remain faithful to Christ. Jesus warned that a man’s enemies would be those of his own household, and “he who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.” He promised that “he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”⁶ Let us pray to God for grace to remain faithful to Christ, no matter what the cost. The Thessalonian Christians “received the word in much affliction, with *joy* of the Holy Spirit.”

It is easy to have joy when things are going well. The natural man *endures* affliction; he doesn’t experience joy in affliction. Without the Holy Spirit it is *impossible* to have joy in affliction, for joy is the Holy Spirit’s fruit. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace.” But the man or woman born again by the Spirit can experience true joy in affliction, because he knows that God is in charge, and he is at every moment working out all things according to the counsel of his own will. He will never abandon his elect, but will unfailingly bring them into his heavenly kingdom—a place of light and life and peace. No matter how bad things may get in this life, his Savior will never leave him nor forsake him.

Consider our Old Testament text in this regard. It is a prophecy of gospel prosperity: “Is it not yet a very little while till Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be esteemed as a forest? In that day the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness. The humble also shall increase their *joy in the LORD*, and the poor among men shall *rejoice* in the Holy One of Israel.”

This interpretation was confirmed by the Lord Jesus Christ when John’s disciples came to ask him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”

⁶ Matt. 10:34–39

Jesus answered: “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: the blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:3–5). It was as if Jesus had said, “Remember, the Holy Scripture foretold that when the Messiah came, he would do supernatural miracles of healing; I, Jesus, do supernatural miracles of healing; therefore, I, Jesus, am the Messiah. You have seen it with your own eyes. Now, go back and report that to John the Baptist.” Jesus confirmed his messiahship by doing the miracles that Holy Scripture prophesied that the Messiah would do. With the coming of Christ the humble would have *joy* in the Lord, and the poor would *rejoice* in the Holy One of Israel. Scripture was being fulfilled.

We have seen that a Christian is *a follower of Christ; a follower of those who proclaim Christ; and a receiver of the word*. Fourthly, a Christian is

4. An echoer of the word

Not only were the Thessalonian Christians receivers of the Word, they were also echoers of the word. Paul writes, “For from you the word of the Lord has *sounded forth*, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place.” The word translated “sounded forth” is literally *echoed*.⁷ Think of a cry echoing back and forth between mountains or buildings or the walls of an empty room: the speaker calls out a phrase or expression, and the sound reverberates, and comes back to the hearer.

Here is a picture of a church with an effective ministry: “from you [the word is plural] the word of the Lord has sounded forth.” Not everyone is called to be an ordained minister of the gospel, but every Christian is called to be an echoer of the word: to take the word that he or she has heard and echo it forth in one’s particular sphere of influence. Dear brother or sister, there are places where you alone have influence, where no one else has influence. There are many places today that resemble the situation spoken of by the prophet Amos: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11). There are men, women and children all around us who would never darken the door of a church, who would never come out to hear the gospel, but if you, as an obedient Christian, echo the truths of the gospel in your sphere of influence, you can have a great effect. Even if you tell people, “I’m a Christian; my utmost desire is to honor Christ above all things,” that can have a great effect. Christ promises: “Whosoever . . . shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.”⁸

The Christian faith was designed to be shared by men and women, boys and girls, who hear and welcome and receive God’s truth as it is preached in the

⁷ ἐξηχέω, *to echo out*

⁸ Matt. 10:32

church, then go out to echo it forth in their own particular sphere of influence—in the homes, neighborhoods and workplaces that they inhabit. Is this something that you want to do? Then pray for opportunities, and let it happen naturally. Don't let fear of what people think keep you from opening your mouth. The word of God is powerful; it has the power to change hearts and affect lives all around us. Your witness can be a powerful force for good. The wicked spout forth their devilish philosophy and worldview with great zeal, trying to convince people that unnatural affections are natural, and that same-sex “marriage” is really marriage, and that people can change their biological sex. How society needs faithful echoers of the Word to speak into this insanity!

Dear brother or sister, Christ is the only Savior for a world of lost sinners, his word is truth, and his gospel needs to be echoed forth. Are you a follower of Christ, a follower of those who proclaim Christ, a receiver of the word, an echoer of the word? Do you joy in affliction? Christian, this is your calling. Amen.