**1 Thessalonians 2:14-16**

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**Suffering For The Gospel**

***13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. 14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, 15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.***

* In our examination of 1 Thessalonians 2:13 we saw that Paul lists **three components in the process of salvation . . .**
	+ ***receiving*** the word of God that is preached,
	+ ***believing*** the word of God to be true . . . resulting in salvation
	+ ***works in you who believe*** that result from salvation . . . that is, ***works*** that result from the Holy Spirit indwelling you.
* It is this last point . . . the ***works in you who believe*** . . . that Paul elaborates on in v. 14-16.
* Paul had previously commended the Thessalonians, in 1:6, for having become imitators of the missionaries and of the Lord **in the manner of Christian living**.
	+ Here, in v. 14-16, he commends them for having become ***imitators*** in a different way . . . that the Thessalonians ***became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea***.

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* The Greek word for ***imitator*** is *mimētēs*, from which we get the word **“mimic,”** meaning “to act in the same way.”
	+ We learn in this passage that the manner in which they had become ***imitators of the churches in Judea*** was **in the manner of suffering for their faith**.
	+ Just as the churches in Judea had suffered persecution, so the Thessalonians were suffering in the same way.
* **But this imitation was not intentional or deliberate**. In other words, the Thessalonians did not say to themselves, “well, the churches in Judea are suffering . . . let us suffer like them.” No, **this is not what was happening**.
	+ In fact, the brethren in Thessalonica probably knew very little of the persecution that their fellow brethren in Judea were suffering.
	+ Paul’s point here in this passage is that the power of the gospel had worked itself out in the lives of both groups of believers so that a definite pattern resulted . . . their willingness to suffer for the gospel.
	+ In other words, **Christians suffer for the gospel, not because they see others suffering and seek to imitate them, but because the Holy Spirit leads them to persevere in their faith, even in the midst of persecution and suffering.**

**Who was persecuting them?**

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* In v. 14 Paul goes on to explain that just as the churches in Judea were suffering persecution at the hands of their fellow countrymen, ***you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews***.
* Here, in v. 14, we learn that the church in Thessalonica suffered in the same way the first churches in Judea suffered . . . persecution from their ***countrymen***.
* Because we know from the book of Acts that the primary instigators of the persecution was the jealous Jews in Thessalonica, we can infer that the term ***countrymen***, as Paul uses it here, is not an ethnic term, but a societal one.
	+ In other words, the Jews who were inciting trouble and persecution in Thessalonica did not follow Paul from Judea, or even Philippi. The Jews who were inciting the “useful Gentile idiots” of Thessalonica were, themselves, residents of Thessalonica.
	+ But because they were Jews, they knew that they could not act unilaterally, for fear of reprisals from the ruling Romans.
	+ Just as the Jews used Pilate to carry out the crucifixion of Christ, so the Jews in the Gentile nations had to manipulate the Gentiles into doing their bidding. And the ignorant and self-serving Gentiles were willing accomplices to their conspiracy.
* So, just as the unbelieving and malicious Jews of Judea conspired to persecute Christ and the early church, so the unbelieving and malicious Jews in the many cities along Paul’s missionary journeys also conspired to persecute Christ by persecuting the church.

**The history of Israel’s persecution of God’s messengers**

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***15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, 16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved . . . .***

* Then, having commended the Thessalonian believers for withstanding the persecution they had come under, in v. 15-16 . . . in a strongly worded denunciation . . . Paul recites the manner in which the Jews of Judea and within the Gentile nations were guilty of sinful persecution.
* In the first phrase of v. 15 Paul cites **the first form of the Jewish persecution . . .** how they ***both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets***.
	+ We know that, chronologically, the Jewish history of killing the Old Testament prophets came before the killing of ***the Lord Jesus.*** But since the killing of Jesus was, by far, the most heinous, Paul mentions it first.
* It is interesting to note that **Paul states that it was the Jews who killed Jesus**.
	+ Note that Paul does not say that the Jews crucified Jesus, because they didn’t. **They couldn’t**. They did not have that authority, according to Roman law. So, instead, they **conspired** **to** ***kill the Lord Jesus*** by maneuvering and coercing Pontius Pilate into doing the deed himself.
	+ But make no mistake about it, it was the Jews who killed Jesus. Had the Jewish religious leadership not incited the mob and forced Pilate to do so, Pilate had no reason to want Jesus executed. In fact, several times Pilate sought to avoid crucifying Jesus, but was out-maneuvered by the Jewish leadership.
* And who would know better that it was the Jews who killed Jesus than Paul? After all, being a high-ranking Pharisee, Paul was most certainly present when Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin and condemned.
	+ And knowing Paul’s own early efforts in persecuting the churches in Judea, he knew that the Jewish leadership wanted all the followers of Jesus to be silenced . . . by any means.
	+ Paul knew, as well as anyone, that the Jews did conspire to ***kill Jesus***.
* The **second** point that Paul makes is that the Jewish people have a long and ugly history of **killing the prophets sent to them by God**.

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* + In the history of Israel there are very few prophets of God who lived out their natural lives. And the reason for this is simple . . . God sent prophets to the Jewish people to rebuke them for their obstinacy, their disobedience and their idolatry.
		- And whenever a prophet would come to the people and preach God’s judgment on their for these things, rather than repent, the people . . . including the religious leaders . . . would rise up and kill the messengers.
	+ In Matthew 23:31 and Luke 11:47-48 the Lord Jesus explicitly states that the nation of Israel was guilty of “***murdering the prophets***.”
		- For example, although it is not explicitly stated in Scripture, ancient texts record that the prophet Isaiah was so despised by the wicked Jewish king Manasseh that while being pursued by Manasseh’s troops, Isaiah sought refuge by hiding in a hollowed out tree. Discovered by the pursuers, the tree . . . and Isaiah in it . . . were sawn in half. This death of Isaiah is alluded to in Hebrews 11:37 when the writer states the fate of God’s prophets...

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***Hebrews 11:36-37— 36 and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated.***

* + Because of Israel’s long history of persecuting and killing the prophets of God, it’s no wonder that many of the men whom God called to serve Him as prophets resisted God’s calling. They knew Israel’s murderous history with the prophets of God . . . being a prophet of God was a hazardous calling and often had an unhappy ending.
* **Thirdly**, after reciting Israel’s history of ***killing the Lord Jesus and the prophets***, Paul then states that the disobedient, unbelieving Jews also ***drove us out***.

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* + The word that Paul uses here, translated ***drove***, literally means “to pursue” or “to harass so as to put to flight.”
		- This very well describes the Jews in Thessalonica who ***drove*** Paul, Silas and Timothy out of Thessalonica and pursued them to Berea, where they continued to harass and pursue them until Paul was forced to flee to Athens.
	+ And Paul’s use of the plural pronoun, ***drove us out***, is a reference to all the missionaries of Christ, including the other apostles.
	+ While they had not yet succeeded in killing Paul, they had succeeded in killing several of the other apostles.
		- In Acts 12 we learn that King Herod has the apostle James, the brother of John, arrested and executed for preaching about Jesus. And seeing that this pleased the Jews, Herod has Peter arrested, with the intent of killing him also. It is only by the mercy of God that Peter is spared when an angel of the Lord comes and frees Peter from the prison.
* But while the Jews had not yet succeeded in killing Paul, it’s not because they hadn’t tried. In Acts 14:19 we read that in Lystra the Jews stoned Paul and left him for dead. It is very possible that Paul did die, but that God brought him back to life so that he could continue his mission.
* The beating that Paul and Silas received in Philippi, just prior to coming to Thessalonica . . . recorded in Acts 16:22 . . . is an example of how the Jews in every city succeeded in driving Paul and his companions out of every city they came to.
	+ In almost every city in which Paul is forced to flee, it is because of the persecution of the Jews and their inciting of the Gentile mobs against the missionaries.

**A tragic irony**

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***v. 15— . . . They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men***

* Then, having recited Israel’s long history of killing the Lord Jesus and the prophets of God, Paul then states a very tragic irony . . . ***they are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men.***
	+ In fact, at the end of v. 15 Paul only states the second part of the irony. If stated fully, Paul’s ironic statement would be . . . **The Jews believe that what they are doing is pleasing to God, but *they are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men.***
* What a terrible and tragic irony for the nation of Israel. Believing themselves to be protectors of God’s holy name and the truth of who God is, the Jewish people were actually doing the opposite.
	+ Far from being pleased with their zeal for Him, God was very displeased with the nation of Israel for having killed the Lord Jesus, for having killed the prophets He sent to admonish and instruct them, and for harassing and killing the missionaries bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

**Two reasons the Jews were enemies of the gospel**

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***v. 16— . . . hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved***

* And, as Paul states, not only were the Jews ***not pleasing to God***, but they were also ***hostile to all men***. Then, to explain what he means by this phrase, Paul clarifies it in the next statement, in v. 16 . . . ***hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved***.
* With this statement Paul is saying, **from personal experience**, that the Jewish people saw the gospel as blasphemous and were determined to thwart its progress.
* From his many dealings with the Jews, Paul knew that there were **2 primary objections to the work of Christian missionaries.**
	+ Their first objection was to the teaching that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and Son of God. This was a blasphemy to the Jews.
	+ Secondly, the Jews were fiercely opposed to the teaching **that Gentiles could receive salvation without first becoming Jews.**
* For Paul, it was bad enough that the Jews rejected Christ and salvation for themselves. But what made it worse was their deliberate efforts to rob the Gentiles of the offer of salvation in Christ.
	+ Of this attitude, biblical scholar Richard Lenski states, “the worst feature of unbelief is not in its own damnation, but its efforts to frustrate the salvation of others.”

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**The result of their efforts to hinder the progress of the gospel**

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***v. 16— . . . with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.***

* Then, having stated that the Jews were guilty of ***hindering*** the efforts to evangelize the Gentiles, at the end of v. 16 Paul tells us the result of their efforts to hinder the progress of the gospel . . . ***with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.***
* The wording of the statement, ***they always fill up the measure of their sins***, is somewhat confusing. Let’s unpack the phrase and see if we can better understand what Paul is saying here.
* The Greek word translated ***always*** means **“at all times.”** Keep that definition in mind for a moment.

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* + The use of the term ***always*** refers to the fact that throughout the history of the nation of Israel, **every generation** has behaved in the way described here by Paul.
	+ In other words, the Jewish people do now as they have ***always*** done . . . resisting God and exposing themselves to His wrath.
		- The idea behind the use of ***always*** is that it had been a characteristic of the nation, **at all times**, to oppose God. And the fact that they now . . . in Paul’s time . . . opposed God was merely in conformity with their fixed character.
	+ Next, in the phrase, ***fill up the measure of their sins***,the word ***measure*** means “the full amount, so as to make it complete.”

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* + - The use of this phrase indicates that there is an amount, or ***measure***, of sin that God has ordained for the nation of Israel to accomplish.
* According to what Paul is saying here, the phrase ***they always fill up the measure of their sins*** refers to the fact that **in every generation of Israel’s history, every generation has resisted God and behaved in a sinful way. And this sinfulness and disobedience has always been to the fullest measure.**

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* In his denunciation of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, the Lord rebukes them with words similar to Paul’s here in 1 Thessalonians 2:15. In Matthew 23:31-32 the Lord tells the religious leaders . . .

***Matthew 23:31-32— 31 "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.”***

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* + You can see Matthew 23:32 is virtually the same as what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:16.
* Similarly, in Stephen’s speech to the Jewish leadership, he states in Acts 5:51-52 . . .

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***Acts 7:51-52— 51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52  "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;***

* + And for these words spoken to the religious leaders of Israel . . . although true . . . Stephen was stoned to death, just as the prophets of the Old Testament suffered at the hands of their forefathers, fulfilling what the Lord and Paul denounce them for . . . **in every generation they commit the same sins their forefathers committed before them.**

**The outcome of their sins**

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***v. 16— . . . But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.***

* Finally, at the end of v. 16 Paul states the ultimate outcome for the nation of Israel for their long history of evil . . . ***But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.***
* Here in this statement the English wording is, once again, somewhat confusing. I believe the key to understanding this phrase is the last word . . . ***utmost***.
	+ The Greek word . . . *telos* . . . means “the end” or “to that which constitutes completion.”
	+ With this phrase, ***but wrath has come upon them to the end***, Paul is saying that **the full measure of the sins of Israel has resulted in God’s wrath coming upon them until the end.**

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**What is God’s wrath?**

* But in saying that Israel’s long history of idolatry and murder of God’s prophets has brought His wrath upon them, the question that emerges is, **“what is God’s wrath?”**
* Theologically, God’s wrath is **His holy and eternal hatred of all unrighteousness**. It is the **displeasure and indignation of God against evil**. It is **the holy anger of God stirred into activity against sin**.
	+ Just as **love is an action verb, so “wrath” is an action verb. God’s wrath is His actions, activated by His anger and hatred of sin.**
* While we may equate wrath with punishment, it is not only punishment that constitutes the wrath of God. That is merely one expression of the divine indignation.
	+ God’s wrath can also take the form of judicial hardening, so as not to believe. We see this form of God’s wrath in Isaiah 6:8-13. Having first seen the glory of God in the temple in v. 1-7, we then read of God’s plan for the idolatrous nation of Israel . . .

***Isaiah 6:8-13— 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" 9 He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand. 10 Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed."*** **[a proclamation of His judicial hardening of the nation] *11 Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And He answered, "Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate, 12 The LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. 13 Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to burning, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump."***

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* + Here in Isaiah 6 we see that God’s plan for the nation of Israel is that He would send prophets to the people to call them to repentance and to turn from their wickedness and idolatry.
	+ The ministries of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah preceded the Assyrian conquest of the 10 northern tribes of Israel and the Babylonian conquest of Judah. Yet despite the warnings and calls to turn from their wickedness, the Jews remained obstinate and disobedient. Ultimately God caused both Israel and Judah to fall to the Assyrians and Babylonians . . . just as He warned.
* God’s wrath can take many surprising forms. For example, when combined with His great patience, God’s wrath may be seen in the withholding of His judgment until the fullness of a man’s sin is completed.
	+ This explains why God is patient toward the wicked . . . allowing them to prosper and live at ease for a time. In doing so, God may be storing up His wrath, like a river behind a dam, for a time in the future when His divine judgment and fury are released, like a torrent, upon the unrepentant sinner.
* The wrath of God may, in fact, come upon a man before there are any external signs of it.
	+ We see this in the case of Israel. Having killed the Lord Jesus, and now learning from the apostle Paul that God’s wrath was upon them, the full outward expression of God’s wrath upon the nation of Israel would not be fully expressed for almost another 20 years . . . in 70 A.D. . . when the wrath of God was poured out on Israel in the form of the Romans destroying Jerusalem and the holy temple and expelling the Jewish people from Israel for the next 1900 years.
	+ And for those 1900 years in exile, even though they remained the Chosen People of God, the Jewish people continued to suffer under the wrath of God at the hands of the wickedness of the world.
	+ And even though the nation of Israel returned to the Land in 1948, we learn from the books of Daniel and Revelation that the nation of Israel continues to suffer the wrath of God, to this day, in the form of both their persecution and their unbelief.
	+ It is not until the end of the Tribulation that the wrath of God upon them will be complete and come to an end.

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**Christians should not look down upon unbelieving Israel. Israel’s pain is our gain**

* Throughout history the Jewish people have been terribly persecuted by the world.
	+ In a small way their hatred by the world has been self-inflicted. As the chosen people of God, the Jews have always separated themselves from the nations of the world and have held the world with attitude of arrogance and disdain. Their arrogance, separation and unfriendliness have certainly not endeared them to the nations in which they lived.
	+ But, by far, the persecution of the Jews by the world has been a result of evil being stirred up against them. In every generation the Jews have been hated and preyed upon merely because they were Jews . . . an irrational hatred.
* But rather than despising and hating the Jews, the nations of the world should feel a sense of **pity and gratitude toward them.**
	+ It is because of their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah that the offer of salvation was extended to us, Gentiles.
	+ The fact is, if the Jews had accepted and believed Jesus as their Messiah at His first advent, salvation would have immediately come to the Jews and **the Gentile nations would have been forever excluded from the kingdom of heaven.**
* It is only because God hardened the Jews, giving them what Paul calls in Romans 11:8 ***a spirit of stupor***, that the offer of salvation then went forth into all the world.
	+ In Matthew 13:15 the Lord Jesus explicitly states what has happened to the Jews . . .

***Matthew 13:15— ‘for the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.'***

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* + Based upon what the Lord teaches us here, and what we learn in other passages of Scripture . . . including the book of Revelation . . . God’s judicial hardening of the nation of Israel continues to this day.
	+ And while Israel suffers under God’s wrath of spiritual hardening, salvation has come to the Gentile nations.
* If you look at Israel’s brief history since the nation returned to their land in 1948, you will find that **the one consistent friend the Jews have had has been Christians.**
	+ And the reason Israel receives consistent and strong support from Christians is because we recognize that Israel’s pain has been our gain. Yet, despite the fact that the Israelites do not yet believe in Jesus as their Messiah . . . yet . . . there is coming a time in the future when God will remove the scales from their eyes and they will finally see Jesus as their Savior and be saved.
* Paul knew this to be true, because he is the one who recorded this in Romans chapters 9-11, when he explained God’s ultimate plan for the nation of Israel.
	+ Nevertheless, despite knowing that God will ultimately restore and save the nation of Israel, in the time in which Paul lived, the Jews had declared themselves to be enemies of Christ and of those men who preached Christ.
	+ In this time in which Paul lived the Jews were enemies of the gospel and of him. His own countrymen . . . the Jews . . . were the worst persecutors of the early church and of the apostles.
	+ But, as we have learned in this lesson, **because the Jews were under the wrath of God, they were merely doing what they had done in every generation of Israel’s history... every generation in Israel’s history has violently resisted God and killed the prophets He sent to call them to repentance.**

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* Here in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 the apostle Paul exhorts and commends the Thessalonian believers for their perseverance in the midst of great suffering at the hands of the enemies of Christ.
	+ With this brief lesson Paul explains that the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles were not only their enemies, but were the enemies of Christ and of the church, everywhere Christ was preached.