

Don't Raise the White Flag!

"All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."

On April 12th, 1861 Confederate troops fired their on Fort Sumter officially starting the Civil War. For 34 straight hours the fort was bombarded. Major Robert Anderson and his small garrison of 80 men held out. But when it became obvious that the relief ships with more troops and food and ammunition could not get past the Confederate guns, and with his own ammunition and food running low, Major Anderson surrendered. No one blamed him for surrendering. He didn't have the means to defend the fort anymore. And dying to the last man would have achieved nothing. In fact, Major Anderson was hailed as a hero for fighting those two days.

Do you ever feel like raising the white flag of surrender? I know I do at times. Every day we struggle against sin and temptation. Everyday it seems as though the church is losing ground. The other day I was picking up some things at the parsonage and I came upon my graduation picture from the Lutheran elementary school I attended. We graduated 26 students that year. Almost every one of them was confirmed that same year; one of them was even a recent convert and he was baptized at the confirmation service. I know of only seven who are still active in church. That's 27%. I know that at least two of them spent time in jail. The Christian Church is under siege. Church numbers are dwindling. Do you feel like it is a losing cause? God tells us not to raise the white flag. Instead he encourages us to keep up the fight because help is coming. Jesus will return soon.

I. God encourages us to keep up the fight.

Acts 17 tells us about the day Paul came to Thessalonica. He entered the Jewish synagogue and over several days he proved to them from the Bible that this Jesus had to be the Christ promised in the Old Testament. Several Jews believed, as did many God-fearing Greeks and many prominent women. But a majority of Jews rejected Jesus. They rounded up every bad character they could find. Then they started a riot. A Christian called Jason was dragged before the city council and had to post bond just because he gave Paul a place to sleep. Paul and Silas had to leave under the cover of night. Their hatred for the Christians was so fierce that stalkers followed Paul to stir up trouble wherever he went.

You and I understand what it means that Jesus is the Christ. It is the gospel. It is the good news that our sins are forgiven by God and we will spend eternity with him. Not even death can prevent that as he promises us a glorious resurrection. We know how good it is that Jesus is the Christ so it surprises us a little that many people don't want him. But don't be surprised.. The Bible tells us why. The sinful mind is hostile to God. It can't submit to God nor does it want to. And don't be surprised if you see that psychology still brewing in your own heart. We don't need the government to lock our doors and shut us down as a church. We all have excuses why we shouldn't go to church.

So, what advice does Paul give to Christians who are suffering and persecuted? Does he encourage them to lay low? Run? Hide? To surrender? No. He tells them to do more. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians: ***"Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. . . . that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body, . . . no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him."*** If you should go jogging and you trip and sprain your ankle, you stop running and get some attention for your ankle. It doesn't make sense to run faster. But that is what we are encouraged to do. Don't surrender. Rather, live and practice your Christianity even more. Paul gives one example where we don't practice sexuality like the rest of the world or cheat people to get ahead. Don't surrender. Keep living as Christians.

II. Because God is just.

If you or I do that, it is guaranteed we will meet resistance. We will be besieged. It will be very hard. So what can God tell us to help us keep up the fight? That help is on the way. God is coming back. ***"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to those who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels."***

He lets us know that there will be three groups of people who are judged on that day. ***"He will punish those who do not know God."*** The first group are the unbelievers. They don't believe in the existence of God or if they do, they worship something else as god. They do not know Christ or the true God. If they heard about Christ, they reject him.

The second group is described like this: **“... and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** These are the ones who come from within churches. This group includes many of the Pharisees who were within God’s church but who rejected Christ as their Savior. It includes the Jews who started a riot in Thessalonica. We see them today they have Bibles in their pews, but claim that this part or that part of it is not true. We can see how these two groups are besieging the church. Such, God says, **“... will be punished with everlasting destruction, and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.”** That makes sense. Reject God, resist him, and you will get what you deserve by a just and fair God.

This leads us to our third group. And what will they receive? Eternal life in a sin-free heaven. As odd as it sounds, this, too, will happen because God is just and fair. How? It says in 1 John 1, **“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is FAITHFUL and JUST and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** God is just when he forgives the believer his sins because Jesus died for those sins. Christ shed real blood as payment for the sins of the whole world. He really died and was placed in a real tomb. He really rose again from the dead and really will come back some day to take us to heaven.

So hang in there. Don’t surrender. In fact, keep living your Christian faith. The relief force is coming soon.

III. What does this mean to me?

That is the words of our text. What does it mean to us living in the twenty first century? First, it gives a chance to look into ourselves. Are we actually suffering for Christ? Or have we already raised the white flag and took the path of least resistance? Have we decided to remain quiet and put our Christianity on the shelf?

But this doesn’t mean we should go out looking for trouble, either. He says that if we do what he says trouble will come. Persecution is terrible, but it does one positive thing. They are hints that we are on the right track for, **“All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.”**

Instead, we should first begin with repentance. If we confess our many terrible sins, we see God’s justice that sin deserves punishment. But in the gospel we see God’s justice when he forgives us because Jesus paid for them with his own life. Then let’s live the new life we have in Christ. As Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, **“... so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders.”** Many resented the Christians in Thessalonica. But many saw what was happening and were curious and asked and they, too, saw and believed in Jesus as the Christ. And finally, let’s not get filled with all sorts of thoughts of vengeance knowing that the ungodly will be punished. A driver zooms past you on the road. Later you see him pulled over receiving a ticket and you think, “Gotcha.” It is sad to see one soul go to hell or to see the devil claim one more person. It would be better, wouldn’t it, if our persecutors became believers? So may we find ways to bring Christ to those who do not know him and who do not obey his gospel. And finally, let’s keep our eyes on the clouds from where Christ will return to relieve us and take us home.

Three hundred Spartans held off the entire Persian army at Thermopylae. They didn’t surrender. The Texans held on to the Alamo. The 101st Airborne Division was surrounded defending Bastogne, but they never surrendered. God calls us to stand our ground and not surrender. He even encourages us to gain ground. It means suffering and persecution. So be it. Christ is coming again soon, and then we will see that God’s justice is just and right. INJ Amen.