



# Seized Before the Day

## "Miracle Grow"

Want to grow really, really fast as a Christian?

In verse three Paul says of the very young believers in Thessalonica, "we are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly..."

Growing "exceedingly" means *beyond what could be expected*.

What was causing this phenomenal growth? Look at the last word of verse five. "Suffer."

If you want two words to describe what causes faith to grow beyond what could be expected, in verse four Paul says, "all your **persecutions** and **tribulations** that you endure."

Suffering has a unique way of causing your faith to grow by leaps and bounds. In fact, it might be the Miracle Grow of faith.

The apostle Paul arrived in Thessalonica and began preaching about Jesus from the Old Testament in the synagogue. People responded to the Good News that their sins could be forgiven by God's Savior. A church was born.

Paul was forced to leave after only three weeks with the new believers. Concerned for them, he was able to send Timothy back to check on them after a few months time. When Timothy returned to Paul he reported a vibrant, healthy church but one with a few questions and problems. Paul wrote First Thessalonians to address some of those questions and problems.

Several months had again passed. The Thessalonians were facing a more sinister spiritual crisis. Apparently they had received a false letter with Paul's signature forged on it to the effect that the seven-year Great Tribulation had already begun and that they were going through it.

After all, they *were* suffering tribulation and persecution... Perhaps the dreaded Day of the Lord had begun without their knowing it!

This letter says, "No!" It hadn't and it wouldn't - not with them on the earth.

2 Thessalonians 2:1 Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, 2 Thessalonians 2:2 not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come.

The Tribulation had not begun; they were not in it and they would not go through it. In the world they would have tribulation; but they would not be in the world during any part of the Tribulation.

*Neither will we.* Christians of the Church Age will be resurrected and raptured to Heaven prior to any portion of the Tribulation.

Then we will return from Heaven to earth with Jesus in His Second Coming when He establishes the kingdom of God on earth.

OK, but what about all the present suffering? Paul took up the subject in the first five verses of chapter one. He will show you that suffering – especially for the sake of Jesus - has a spiritual purpose and that the enduring of suffering accomplishes that purpose.

2 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

God used three ordinary men to change the eternal lives of the people of Thessalonica. They simply made themselves available and God did the rest.

From an earthly perspective they were in the city of Thessalonica. But from a heavenly perspective they were "in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Their lives – including any suffering – were under the supervision of two glorious Persons: The sovereign almighty God and His unique Son, Jesus Christ.

Further, we know that Jesus in Heaven intercedes for us with His Father. We're in good hands.

2 Thessalonians 1:2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the uniquely Christian greeting of the Church. "Grace" is God's unmerited, undeserved favor. You are saved by grace through faith as a gift from God.

Grace is also God's power, always sufficient for you in any suffering. You're not just saved by grace; you are sustained by it.

Because of His grace in saving you, you can experience true "peace." True peace is first of all peace with God in a personal relationship with Him made possible by Jesus; then it is the possibility of having the peace of God in your heart. The peace of God is a precious resource to suffering believers.

The sovereign almighty God is supervising your life on earth from Heaven. His Son, Who was and is God, is always praying for you. You can therefore have peace in your heart regardless your suffering.

We still haven't seen any purpose for suffering. Here it is, in verse three.

2 Thessalonians 1:3 We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other,

(BTW: Verses three through ten are one continuous sentence!).

Paul couldn't help but be "thank[ful]" to God for what He was accomplishing through their suffering. Because of it, their "faith [was growing] exceedingly" and their "love" was "abound[ing]."

Let's look first at "faith." Faith should have two qualities: It should be *genuine*, and it should be *growing*. Suffering accomplishes both.

How do you know your faith is genuine? It's real when it is a way of life and of responding to life in the real world. When you continue in faith through suffering, it's genuine.

The opposite can be said, too. Suffering reveals false faith. Jesus told a parable in which seed fell on various soils. The seed represented the saving Word of God; the soils represented the human heart. Jesus said,

Matthew 13:20 ...he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; Matthew 13:21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

The Thessalonians had not fallen away. Suffering showed that their faith was genuine, saving faith that had taken root in their hearts.

The next purpose for suffering was its effect in the church; your "love... abounds toward each other."

"Love" is not a feeling; it is an activity of self-sacrificing serving of others. Their individual suffering had not made them selfish, but rather self-less. They went about ministering to one another in practical ways.

Churches can be a place where many Christians are lonely together in their suffering. Or they can be vibrant with love as we reach-out to one another.

Suffering must be endured to accomplish its purpose:

2 Thessalonians 1:4 so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure,

Paul and his companions were "boast[ing]" about them. God was doing a great work both in them and through them.

Think of all the things you might boast about concerning someone. You don't immediately think of boasting about how they are handling suffering, do you? It seems so negative.

"Endure" is a key word. It's not the suffering itself that produces spiritual growth; it is our enduring it - and especially our enduring it with "patience" and "faith."

- "Patience" means *perseverance*, and especially sustaining your hope despite difficulties.
- "Faith" means faithfulness. You don't get flaky; you remain faithful.

The suffering we've been alluding to is identified specifically as "persecutions and tribulations."

- "Persecutions" are the hostilities you suffer from the enemies of God.
- "Tribulations" are the afflictions that their persecution inflicts upon you.

2 Thessalonians 1:5 which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer;

The "righteous judgment of God" is a reference to the coming Great Tribulation. He will execute His judgment against sin upon the earth, giving men a chance to repent and be saved.

Their current condition of enduring suffering from the hands of nonbelievers was strong evidence that the "righteous judgment of God" against nonbelievers was still in the future. It looks forward to the day Jesus Christ would return.

The "kingdom of God" means the earthly kingdom that Jesus will establish when He returns to earth in His Second Coming. Our present suffering is preparing us for our future place in the kingdom. It's a kind training. It's a school of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, your suffering is significant. You're not always told why it is significant. You don't always know its complete work in you. But you can be certain it is important.

Daniel LaRusso didn't realize that painting Mr. Myagi's fence and waxing his cars and sanding his deck were really training him to defend himself in a karate tournament. He couldn't make the connection at first.

Our suffering is like that. We might never make the connection this side of the Millennium, but that doesn't mean our troubles are insignificant.

Nonbelievers see suffering differently from Christians. It is usual for them to think that there is no God because they think that suffering is evil or that God would stop it if he really did exist.

The saved person sees things in a different light from the lost soul. The Bible is sure that there is value in suffering, for by it "the heart is made better" (Ecclesiastes 7:3).

Let me give you an alternate translation of this verse: "All this trouble is a clear sign that God has decided to make you fit for the kingdom [for which] you're suffering now..." (MSG).

E. W. Rogers, in commenting on the phrase "you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God," states:

This has to do with human responsibility. On the side of divine sovereignty we have been made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, and this meetness is solely due to our association with Christ in His death and resurrection. We are graced in the Beloved, altogether independent of anything in ourselves, either before or since we were saved.

But God allows His people to go through persecutions and tribulations in order to develop in them the moral excellencies which make them "worthy citizens" of that kingdom.

Let's be a caring community that encourages one another to endure suffering so that our faith can grow exceedingly as we await the coming of our Savior for us.