

# EMBEDDED

There is no greater force for change or cultural influence than the local church. The church in Thessalonica is a powerful example: it's one of the farthest-flung churches Paul is able to plant. From there, all of Europe is reached for Christ. Though the people of this young church have serious questions about the reason for their existence, Paul reassures them in 1 Thessalonians that they are fulfilling God's purpose just by being present in the world. Because they are **Embedded**, they stand as a witness to the power and love of Jesus Christ. They are examples of the faith, hope, and love that characterize the Christian life. The church embedded is an insurgency, toppling the kingdoms of this world by sharing the reality of the Kingdom of God.

## FACING THE WIND • I Thessalonians 3:2-10 • Tim McConnell • May 21, 2017

After 40-something years of life, I'm still genuinely surprised when hard times come. What is this? It's like someone who's genuinely surprised when they don't win the lottery. "I didn't win. I can't believe it." You can't believe it? Where have you been? Nobody ever wins. You're surprised when life gets hard? Where have you been? "But I gave my life to Christ! Things should be easy now." You haven't been paying attention. Some things are a lot easier after you know Christ and put your life in His hands, absolutely. There is no guilt in life, no fear in death, no purposelessness, no meaninglessness, there is confidence in right and wrong, ethical clarity, joyful hope, power to love, freedom from sin, abiding faith, and eternal life starting right now! That's pretty good. But that does not mean escape from struggle. I should not be surprised. We should not be surprised. As it says in 1 Peter 4:12, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Don't you feel surprised when it comes? Well, this is strange. When you are in Christ, the waves of opposition begin to build. In fact, the wind blows against you harder than ever. But here's the good news, here's what we need to know this morning—your faith is stronger than fire; the wind will only deepen your roots.

We are embedded. Your presence is God's purpose. We are shining like gold reflecting the light of heaven. We don't escape this world, but we love this world the way Jesus loves it and we remain embedded and faithful. We are urging our children to be faithful too. We know the gospel doesn't migrate from generation to generation by accident, but by intentional action and sacrifice. Our little church has seen 144 years, but we know that it is our time now, this is our time now and what we do will determine whether it sees another 144. So we are determined and confident we can serve Jesus today and reflect His love and glory and beauty to those who do not yet know Him, even down to the next generation and those as yet unborn. We are in it! We are in the game. And today, we recognize, we will face opposition. We have not yet met our final challenge as a church. Friends, Christians, you have not yet met your final challenge. I want you and your family rooted and standing firm in the Lord, ready for the next time the wind blows. As believers we know more struggle is on the way, but we also know: Faith is stronger than fire; wind will only deepen our roots.

The young Thessalonian church was surprised by three things, you might remember from when we started this series. They were surprised by death; they literally thought no one would die after Jesus beat death. They were surprised by people walking away. And they were surprised by the force, even brutality, of vicious hatred they got from the people around them once they named Jesus. Try to understand. Their city had every kind of spirituality you could imagine. You could follow the philosophy of Aristotle, or of Plato, or the Stoicism of Seneca. You could join one of the mystery cults of the Far East and worship Isis or Cybele or venture into Zoroastrianism. You could honor the old Greek gods; Olympus was just around the corner. Or you could move into the growing Roman religion called Sol Invictus (the unconquerable sun), because isn't that what Rome is? Victory and power stretching coast to coast. But most just played out the common cultural religion of giving a little tip of the hat to the nearest god. If you plant a field, a little sacrifice to the god of the fields. Open a bottle of wine, a little tip to Bacchus. Want to get married, have a child, buy a home, make a business deal? There is always a god to honor—a kind of totemism. A pinch of luck please for any anxious venture. Nobody really believed they were there, but this is how we all live together. Are we so much more sophisticated now? How often do we treat God this way?

But something weird happened when the people named Jesus. There was anger. Paul and Silas and Luke were all there preaching the gospel, hosted by a man named Jason, probably holding church in his house, when we read in Acts 17 the people rose up against them, formed a mob and attacked the house, broke in and dragged Jason and some others out into the street. They called the city authorities out and yelled that these men were—and isn't this a telling phrase—"turning the world upside down." Something about Jesus turns the world upside down. People don't like that. Why such anger? Why such opposition? I can only turn to what Jesus Himself said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." (John 15:18-19) "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone

who does evil hates the light.” (John 3:19-20) Does “hate” sound too strong a word? Does “evil” sound too strong? Maybe for us, in our society. But to many around the world and many through history, this vocabulary is too light to describe what they have experienced as Christians.

In many Christian traditions the body of Christ remains on the cross, as though the crucifixion were still happening right now. We don't have the body of Jesus up there. We want to emphasize that the sacrifice of Jesus happened once and was finished. But the spirit of crucifixion is still active. The spirit among men and women that opposes the light of Christ never stopped trying to kill Jesus. You've maybe heard of how Christians were thrown to the lions or killed by gladiators to entertain crowds in the coliseums. There are so many stories. In 320 AD a group of forty soldiers came to Christ. Their officer marched them naked into a frozen lake to freeze to death. The movie *Silence* last year was about the way Christians were tortured and killed in Japan. In Iraq, a city called Qaraqosh once home to 50,000 Christians stands empty, rubble, because the Christians who survived the attack from ISIS in 2014 are still living in a tent city in Erbil too afraid to return. Or the 21 Egyptian martyrs of 2015, marched down the coast of Libya. Or the church bombings in Egypt. It goes on. It is difficult to even think about these events, but we must remain tied—we are tied—to Christian suffering around the world. Or else we think that by “persecution” we mean a snide remark or getting scratched off a Christmas party invite list. There is real opposition. Real fire. But your faith is stronger than fire. There is also real struggle in the Christian life. Times of trial. Seasons of hardship. But the storm will deepen your roots.

Paul and his team were run out of town and could not get back. We see Paul anxious here, wondering, were the roots deep enough? Will the little church survive the wind and the fire of persecution? Will they get lured into temptation to abandon the Lord when it gets tough? They had talked about the cost of discipleship, how Jesus had been crucified in Jerusalem and that same opposing spirit would come against them. But he didn't know if they held on or not. Verse 5: “For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.” I dropped almost a hundred bucks of grass seed on my lawn right before that freeze came two weeks

ago. My labors were in vain. Paul was worried in the same way. So, back in verse 2, “We sent Timothy” (obviously the real hero in the story!), “who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.” We told you it was going to be hard. They sent Timothy. Now Timothy (hero) has returned and they get the good news: the church survived. The building is still up after the storm. The flag is still flying high after the long night of combat. They survived!

The news is overwhelming for Paul. You can hear his breathlessness: “But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 3:6-8). It's as though they were holding their breath to hear, and now they can breathe again. Paul was turning purple. Now we can really live. Notice this now, not because they have had no persecution, not because they escaped hard times, but because in the distress and in the persecution “you are standing firm in the Lord.” The wind blew, but they were rooted. Embedded and faithful. So now becoming models, examples, not only to other believers but able to have the gospel ring from them to the far ends of the earth. From this little church the gospel spread into Europe. The roots held.

Every now and then a hurricane swells up in the Atlantic and slams into the East Coast doing terrible damage. Homes get swept away, crops are destroyed, sometimes people die. So people work to be less and less surprised when the storm comes. We study wind and weather, float sensors in the ocean, send radar planes into the eye of the storm. No more surprises! We are surprised when we face wind and waves in our lives. It always seems to surprise us when things get hard, or when we feel opposition to the way of Christ. Well, we should not be surprised. Instead we should be expectant and prepared to face the wind. Many trees get destroyed by a hurricane, but the ones that survive

can grow even stronger. The rain softens the soil allowing the roots to grow deeper and the wind bends the trunk opening the flow of sap. The church in Thessalonica stood firm in the wind. Our church has stood firm. You can stand firm too. Your faith is stronger than fire and the wind will only make the roots grow deeper.

So, it isn't about avoiding the trials and temptations. It isn't about finding a way to escape the wind. The wind is coming. It's about being rooted in Christ even as we are embedded in the world. There is no need to ask *whether* the storm is coming. It's coming. When we are in the middle of it we want to ask *why*. Why? And if it gets real tough we succumb to *woe*—woe is me. Drop the *whether* the *why* and the *woe*—pick up the *how*. How will you carry through? How, O Lord, will I make it through the next storm? Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30) Now, how can a yoke be easy and light? A yoke is that huge piece of wood you lay across the shoulders of two oxen to drive them together. How can that be easy? Even restful? Because Jesus is on the other side with you. Just look over and see Jesus, right there, with the wood across His shoulders. You, if you are in Christ, you are yoked up with all the power of God in Jesus. You can make it.

One day a guard said to Nelson Mandela, "Do you not know I have the power to take your life?" He replied, "Do you not know I have the power to go to my death freely?" Once you are in Christ, the Lord of All, the One victorious over even death, what can bind you? What can hold you down? What can blow you over? What can separate you from His love? You are free. Stand firm in the Lord, embedded and faithful, even when the wind comes. Your faith is stronger than fire; the wind will only deepen the roots.

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## STUDY GUIDE

### "Embedded: Facing the Wind" I Thessalonians 3:2-10

#### Start It

- Along the shore of Jekyll Island in Georgia are some trees that look like God made them to grow sideways. The constant wind has shaped their growth, but their roots hold the shore together. Life includes wind, waves, storms and struggles. They can push hard and blow ferociously, but there is also a strength holding us firm and keeping us rooted.

#### Study It

- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. Looking also at Acts 17:1-9, what sort of opposition did the Christians face in Thessalonica? Where does Paul believe that animus began?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17 – 3:1. Again referencing Acts, how did Paul get separated from this community? How does he feel about that separation?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 3:2-5. Why did Paul send Timothy? What is Paul's chief concern about the church he left behind? Did Paul preach cheap grace, a life without trouble, when he was with this church or did he preach the cost of discipleship? Why is he still concerned?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10. What is Timothy's report? How does that report make Paul feel? Does Paul care that they are in discomfort? What is most important, discomfort or faithfulness?
- What does this passage teach us about how we should relate to those in suffering or persecution? How does this passage inspire you to stay faithful in the face of trials and temptations?

#### Pray It

*O Lord our God, without Your help no promise is sure. We promise to be faithful, but when the winds come we falter unless You come quickly to our aid. Come quickly, Lord, and help us, that we might honor You with joy in the middle of trials and suffering, in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.*

#### Live It

Read a story of Christian suffering or persecution in our contemporary world and determine one way to connect with that suffering.