

"The Theology of Suffering"

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Fellow servants of our great Creator God:

Next week we look forward to commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. You are, no doubt, well aware of the event that we celebrate as the beginning of that Reformation: the posting of the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Unfortunately that is almost *all* that most today know about the Reformation. Most have never read those 95 Theses (doctrinal statements). For example, did you know that the main purpose of the 95 Theses was not to reform the Roman Catholic Church but to begin a debate among the educated classes in Germany on really only one topic – the forgiveness of sins as it relates to the sale of indulgences? Did you know that a significant number of the 95 Theses posted by Luther were doctrinally inaccurate and later disavowed or withdrawn? Did you know that the earliest seeds of the Reformation were sown by John Wycliffe in England exactly 100 years before the birth of Luther and carried forward by other reformers like John Hus and Girolamo Savonarola long before Luther arrived on the scene?

Yet the posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517 is a reasonable date because God himself, on that date, began the process whereby he removed the foot of Roman Catholicism from the neck of his Church on earth. This amazing, history-changing event was not *accomplished* by the posting of the 95 Theses. That event rather set God's match to the kindling that God himself had collected; it set into motion a series of events through which God finally returned the truth of the gospel to his Church on earth.

One of the more amazing aspects of the Reformation is how quickly God transformed Luther from the Roman Catholic author of the questionable statements contained in the 95 Theses to the doctrinally sound pillar by which he is known today. Only six months after he posted his Theses, Luther in April of 1518 authored another series of 28 doctrinal statements known collectively today as the Heidelberg Theses as presented at the Heidelberg Disputation. In contrast to the 95 Theses, the Heidelberg Theses were far more significant, doctrinally sound, and addressed an even more critical topic in that he therein attacked the whole system of medieval scholastic theology. The theme of his writings in the Heidelberg Theses can be generally summarized as pointing out the difference between the *Theology of Glory* and the *Theology of the Cross*.

Confused yet? Disputation? Theses? Theology of glory? Is any of this really necessary or worthwhile? Actually it is. Very much so. Our text for this morning will help us to see how and why these things are actually as critically important today as they were 500 years ago. The text that will form the basis

for our study is found in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, the First Chapter:

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² ¶ We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

These are God's words. In humble acknowledgement of that fact, and asking the God who delivered these words to us this morning to also bless us through their study, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

What do you know about a man named Aristotle? I would guess that many of you could identify him, at minimum, as a famous Greek philosopher. A few might even remember that he lived and taught a little over 300 years before the birth of Christ. There's more we need to know. Aristotle was the third in the line of the three great Greek philosophers. He studied under Plato, who was a student of Socrates. His influence on the world of his day was also greatly expanded in that he was the personal tutor of Alexander the Great, the man who went on to conquer much of the civilized world of his day.

Why should we care about any of this today, given the fact that the man has been dead for over 2,300 years? Because, believe it or not, his influence is still very much alive and active. There has always been a very fine line between philosophy and religion. For some, the difference is non-existent – their philosophy seeps naturally into their religion. Often the two are inseparable. Philosophers are, for the most part, focused on finding

the meaning of life – on sifting through all of the available data and developing a system by which they can bring order and understanding to their world. For Aristotle that meant learning all that he could about God not by studying what God has said about himself but by figuring out God's will and intent through the study of world events.

Sounds fairly logical, doesn't it? Even as a child you can figure out whether mom is happy or unhappy by watching her – by observing what she does, how she acts, and what she says. You can also thereby learn something about your own actions by watching mom's. If she's smiling at you, she's probably happy with you and you can be pretty sure that you haven't done anything wrong.

Since that seems to work pretty well for most human interaction, Aristotle made the natural assumption that that would also work for understanding God. In other words, if you make the assumption that God controls what goes on in this life, and things are good in your world, then that must mean that whatever you are doing is pleasing to your God. That seems to be a fairly logical and reasonable worldview, but is it accurate? Not even close.

The basic assumption that Aristotle made is that God operates along the same lines as human beings. That's also how and why his philosophy fails before it even begins. In fact there is little if any correlation or connection between what happens to us in this world and how our God feels about us. Our text for this morning touches on this, but the reference is so subtle, so seemingly minor or unimportant, that it's easy to miss. Hear those words again from verse 6: ***And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.***

You probably caught the words this time (***for you received the word in much affliction***) but does the weight of those simple words yet register? Do you understand how important they are?

This is actually a problem that has plagued human beings of every generation – the idea that God's will can be known through observation. The first example we find in the Bible is probably in the Book of Job. Job's friends were certain that his misfortune had to be the result of some sin that Job had committed. Their counsel to Job was that he needed to identify the sin, to repent of it, and then and only then God would reverse his fortunes. The fact is God allowed Satan to afflict Job for reasons that are fully known only to him. The men of Jesus' day, consciously or not, had also adopted Aristotle's view that God's favor or displeasure could be understood by outward circumstances. You may recall their question to Jesus (recorded in John 9) when they saw a man who was born blind:

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus' response is telling: ***"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."*** There are actually two parts to Jesus' answer. The first is that outward conditions or circumstances cannot be used as an indicator of God's pleasure or displeasure. The other part of Jesus' answer is equally as important: ***"God is in control, but man cannot always recognize or comprehend how every circumstance demonstrates God's will."***

Is it really all that important that we understand these basic truths? Absolutely. If you were to adopt Aristotle's view, ask yourself, first of all, what you would come to believe about God by simply observing world events. Would you conclude that God is responsible for both good and evil? Would you conclude that a person had been good if his life was good? Would you conclude that a person was bad if his life was filled with suffering, hardship, and frustration, and that he could change his fortunes by changing his behavior? Would you assume that man could alter his relationship with his God by his own works or actions?

Those who don't know the true God (in this and every generation) would answer yes to every one of these questions – and they would be absolutely dead wrong. Worse still, they would have thereby adopted a damning version of work righteousness – the idea that we can make ourselves lovable in God's sight through our own actions.

While that would obviously be bad enough in itself, adopting Aristotle's philosophy would also cause you to reject the sole path to eternal life. How so? Because adopting the Christian faith nearly always *appears* to bring about God's great displeasure. Go back to those simple words from this morning's text: ***And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction.*** In Aristotle's view, Christianity cannot be pleasing to God because bad things happen to Christians. It's no more complicated than that. In fact if you want to know how to please God, look for those who enjoy earthly success, and then just do what they do.

Let me throw out just a couple names to demonstrate just how silly that idea really is: Hugh Hefner, Harvey Weinstein, Joseph Stalin, and Adolf Hitler. Though there were and are countless others, you get the point: temporal power and wealth have no bearing on how God regards a human being or his actions. And yet that is exactly the view that had been adopted by the church of Luther's day, and that is precisely the error that he attacked in his 28 Heidelberg Theses.

Clearly the need for an ongoing reformation still exists since Aristotle's error has again been adopted not just by society but by many Christian denominations. Luther identified the problem as the difference between the Theology of Glory and the Theology of the Cross. The Theology of Glory is the notion that Christians can and should prosper and thrive in this world. In general, that means that the better you live your life, the more *glorious* it will be, and therefore the more your God will bless you.

God in his Word teaches almost just the opposite. He teaches the Theology of the Cross, which can also be characterized as the Theology of Suffering. Jesus repeatedly warned us that this is what we should expect – just as he both expected and received no less. That doesn't mean, of course, that God doesn't and won't bless us or that life for the child of God will be an uninterrupted succession of bad. It means that we don't base our relationship with our God on what we can observe but *on what he tells us in his Word*. There he tells us that his love for us never changes, never diminishes or fades, never is in doubt. Our relationship with our God was permanently established when Jesus Christ paid for every single one of our sins on Calvary.

Go back for just a moment to our text. The Holy Spirit through Paul praised the faith of the Christians in Thessalonica. He reminded them that God had chosen them to spend eternity with him in heaven, that that this remains true regardless of the hardships they were suffering because of their allegiance to the One True Triune God. That same truth was conveyed by Paul to Christians wherever he ministered, *because the same truths applied*. From Acts 14: **"When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."** Not that the hardship wasn't just in this place or that place; it was everywhere that individuals turned from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ.

God's Word consistently teaches not a Theology of Glory but a Theology of the Cross, of suffering. It was always that way among God's Old Testament children, it reached its darkest depths in connection with our Savior and what he endured to pay our sin-debt, and that same Savior has warned us it will continue until he returns. Do not allow this fact of life to turn you from the path that you are on – the only path that leads to God's heaven. Have the wisdom to see through the hardship, frustration, and heartache and to recognize not only that God is in control at all times, but that the love of your Creator Savior-God is both perfect and perfectly

consistent. Jesus, *through his suffering*, established that relationship for us. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 45:1-7** Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: ² "I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. ⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. ⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, ⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. ⁷ I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

^{ESV} **Matthew 22:15-22** Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

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The 20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 22, 2017

The Opening Hymn – 738 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Alleluia! Sing to Jesus"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 45:1-7) The most remarkable aspect of our first reading escapes us until we understand that these words were written about 100 years before the events here foretold ever took place. In other words, Cyrus was mentioned here though he had not yet been born, and the kingdoms he was to destroy had not yet been established. The message to us is that God is in control even of future events, and he expects all men to give glory and honor to him at all times. Even the godless serve as instruments of our Triune God to accomplish his will. All will be called to account who fail to honor God as God.

Psalm 2 (Supplement page 30)

The Gospel Lesson: (Matthew 22:15-22) How foolish for man to think that he can fool God – in any way. In our second lesson we read how some tried to trick Jesus into alienating himself from the people by asking him a question about paying taxes. "What do you think?" they asked him. God does not "think." God knows, he commands, he dictates truth. Man's role is to listen and learn. Man can never approach God as an equal. In this reading God reaffirms his will that we fulfill our obligations as citizens, giving due honor to God's appointed representatives, whether good or bad.

The Confession of Faith -

Nicene Creed – *(Supplement page 5)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 783 (Stanzas 1-3) *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Jesus, Shepherd of the Sheep"

The Sermon – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

"The Theology of the Cross – the Theology of Suffering"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 755 (Stanzas 1-2, 5) *(Brown Hymnal)*

"What Is This Bread"

The Preparation for Holy Communion *(Brown Hymnal page 17)*

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving *(Brown Hymnal page 20)*

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 783 (Stanzas 4-5) *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Jesus, Shepherd of the Sheep"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (32) Average (40) September Mortgage Balance (\$33,453)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-5:00 p.m.	– Joint Reformation Service in Bowdle

CLC News – Pastor David Schaller has returned the call to Immanuel of Mankato. That congregation has now called Pastor Andrew Schaller.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour.

Joint Reformation Service – Next Sunday marks the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. We will be commemorating the event in a number of different ways, beginning this morning, continuing with Bible Class next Sunday, during next Sunday's worship service, and finally with our annual Joint Reformation service in Bowdle. That service begins at 5pm, followed by a fellowship meal. Those planning to attend are invited to bring a dessert to share. Please let Pastor Roehl know if you are planning to attend so we can coordinate rides.