



Imitators

The theme of being an imitator is one that runs through the pages of the scriptures. Elisha, for example was spoken of as one “who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah”; that is, he trained under and imitated his mentor prophet. Joshua was an imitator of Moses, and was trained to take Moses’ place as the one who would lead the children of Israel in the conquest of the promised land. “A pupil,” said the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, “is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). That is why the apostle Paul would command the Corinthian brethren in the Roman province of Achaia, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

- ◆ **In much tribulation** — The Founder of Christianity Himself was persecuted and executed. The second preached message that was recorded resulted in Peter and John’s being put on trial. Before long, Saul of Tarsus was using his tremendous zeal (as he would later put it — “zeal without knowledge”) to breathe “threats and murder” upon those early saints, and they were driven out of Jerusalem and scattered. Later that same Saul, known as the apostle Paul, suffered stoning, beatings, and lashings at the hands of the Jews and Roman authorities. He thus commends the brethren in Thessalonica, noting, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). They became *imitators*! These saints from the Roman province of Macedonia not only entered into persecution, but they imitated the apostles and the Lord Jesus in that they came through those fires successfully, with their faith intact. They received what the scripture boldly and uncompromisingly calls “the word,” and consequently underwent what is termed “much tribulation.” But, as imitators of the apostles and Christ, they endured and overcame their challenges “with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” This is a powerful commentary on the faith of these brethren.

- ◆ **Became an example** — God uses events and circumstances to accomplish His will. When Saul of Tarsus was sitting blinded and repentant in the house of Judas, located on Straight Street in Damascus, he could not have known what the Almighty was going to do with his life. He was only conscious that he was guilty of persecuting the church of the living God, and wanting therefore to be forgiven by and be at peace with the God of Israel. He was unaware that God would feature his conversion in the eternal spotlight of the word of God, and that his turning away from Judaism to the life of the new covenant would be a core example for many millions to come. In the same way, each of the brethren in Thessalonica was conscious only of his own spiritual battle to maintain his faith and focus during the specific persecution and threatening he was experiencing. But God took that suffering and advertised it to encourage other brethren. “You became an example to all the believers,” asseverates the apostle, “in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thessalonians 1:7). The All Wise caused the word of their positive victories to spread throughout Macedonia and Achaia; their suffering was not in vain, but was magnified for God’s purposes.

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But the effects of their victorious suffering were not limited to their own contemporaries. Because God has seen fit to have this letter recorded in His eternal word, their faith continues to encourage brethren today. A lesson for modern saints today is clear: suffering and persecution is not for the moment and the event only. God has a much bigger picture, and often is willing to shine His light on that suffering, and have the saint’s positive overcoming of that persecution serve as an encouragement for multitudes. May modern saints be willing to learn from their example, and to face the coming persecution of our time with hope and with the joy of the Holy Spirit!